

Across Latin America, the number of Catholics drops, Protestants and unaffiliated increase

by [Alan Gomez](#) in the [December 24, 2014](#) issue

In just one generation, Latin America has seen the number of people who identify themselves as Catholic plummet, with more people becoming Protestant or dropping religion altogether, a new report shows.

The shift is dramatic for a region that has long been a bastion of Catholicism. With more than 425 million Catholics, Latin America accounts for nearly 40 percent of the global Catholic population. Through the 1960s, at least 90 percent of Latin Americans were Catholic, and 84 percent of people surveyed recently by the Pew Research Center said they were raised Catholic.

But the report released in mid-November found that only 69 percent of Latin Americans still consider themselves Catholic, with more people switching to more conservative Protestant churches (19 percent) or describing themselves as agnostic or religiously unaffiliated (8 percent).

Among those who are Protestant, 65 percent identify themselves as Pentecostals, whether or not they belong to a Pentecostal denomination.

“While the movement from Catholicism to Protestantism has occurred among people of all ages and socioeconomic levels, the survey reveals some broad demographic patterns among converts,” the report states. “In most countries surveyed, pluralities of Catholic-to-Protestant converts say they left Catholicism before the age of 25.”

In Argentina, Bolivia, and Costa Rica, those who became Protestant were less likely to have secondary education than Catholics.

The study also points to more frequent religious practice, including prayer and reading scripture outside of services, among Protestants as compared to Catholics in Latin America.

“A regional median of 83 percent of Protestants report attending church at least once a month, compared with a median of 62 percent of Catholics,” the report

states.

People gave Pew a wide variety of reasons for abandoning the Catholic Church. The most common was people saying they wanted a more personal connection with God. Others said they enjoyed the style of worship at their new church or that they were looking for a greater emphasis on morality.

Even last year's election of an Argentine as pope has led to conflicting feelings in Latin America.

The study found that "people who are currently Catholic overwhelmingly view Francis favorably and consider his papacy a major change for the church," the report states. "But former Catholics are more skeptical about Pope Francis.

Pew's research also suggests that evangelization efforts have worked. More than half of the people who switched from the Catholic Church to Protestant churches (58 percent) say their new church reached out to them.

The shift in beliefs mirrors those seen in the Hispanic population in the United States. About 22 percent of Hispanics in the United States are now members of Protestant churches, compared to 19 percent in Latin America.

In addition to affiliated religion, many in the region say they believe in some practices associated with Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Brazilian, and indigenous religions. For example, at least a third of adults in every country believe in the "evil eye," or the idea that some people can cast curses on others.

The report was prepared by conducting 30,000 face-to-face interviews in three languages in 18 countries between October 2013 and February 2014. The margin of error for each country ranges between 2.8 and 4 points. —*USA Today*; added sources