

Catholics call Pope Francis ‘a change for the better’

by [Cathy Lynn Grossman](#)

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Americans are huge fans of Pope Francis and U.S. Catholics not only like him, they like where he’s taking their church, according to a new Pew Research survey released Thursday (March 6).

But researchers cautioned that doesn’t necessarily mean there is a “Francis effect” that has brought Catholics back to church or the confessional, although the faithful are clearly more enthusiastic.

Ahead of the one-year anniversary of his March 13 election, Pope Francis’ favorable standing (85 percent among Catholics, 66 percent overall) rivals stellar ratings for Pope John Paul II during the peak years of his pontificate and for Pope Benedict XVI when he visited New York and Washington in 2008.

About seven in 10 Catholics (and nearly six in 10 U.S. adults overall) say Francis “represents a major change in direction for the Catholic Church” and that it is “a change for the better.”

“Catholics of all ages are pro-Francis and older Catholics give him the highest very favorable rating,” said Greg Smith, director of U.S. Religion Surveys for Pew Research. However, he said, “It is hard to know exactly why.”

The Rev. Thomas Reese, a political scientist and analyst for National Catholic Reporter who has read the Pew findings, pointed out that, “In general, Catholics like their popes no matter who they are. But in the past, they liked the singer, not the song. High numbers for Francis in terms of change shows that now they like the singer and the new song.”

Many even want to change the notes. The Pew survey found majority support for major changes in church doctrine and tradition—and marked optimism that such changes “definitely or probably” will happen by 2050—on issues such as allowing:

- Catholics to use birth control: 77 percent said the church should allow it and 56 percent expect it will, about the same (53 percent) as gave that prediction last year.
- Priests to marry: 72 percent say this should happen and 51 percent expect it will, up from 39 percent last year.
- Women to become priests: 68 percent say this should happen and 42 percent expect it will, up from 37 percent last year.

One surprising finding: 50 percent of U.S. Catholics say the church should recognize same-sex marriages and 36 percent say they think this will happen by 2050. Even among people who attend Mass at least weekly—often the oldest and most conservative Catholics—one in three say the church should recognize same-sex marriages, said Smith.

“This is the first time we have asked (the same-sex marriage) question. These are not small numbers,” said Smith. He added that this same group showed majority support for allowing birth control (63 percent), married

priests (57 percent) and women's ordination (54 percent).

However, while Pew's survey reflects shifting points of view, it found mixed results on changes in Catholic behavior.

There has been no statistically significant rise in the number of Americans who identify as Catholic; in frequency of Mass attendance by Catholics; in Catholics going to confession or volunteering in their churches or communities, Smith said.

What they did find is that "that people already committed to the church are more energized," Smith said. According to the survey, people report that in the last year they are:

- More excited about faith (26 percent)
- Praying more often (40 percent)
- Reading the Bible and other religious texts more (21 percent)

But it's unclear if this is a result of a "Francis effect" or a Francis coincidence. Questions mentioning Francis were asked separately from questions about religious behavior to avoid any effect from the overall enthusiasm for the pope. That's because "people want to be seen saying nice things about this person," Smith said.

When it came to assessing Francis' actions, he scored generally high marks on issues that Catholics cite as among their top priorities when he was elected last year:

- 81 percent say he is doing an excellent or good job on spreading the Catholic faith, which they considered "a top priority" for the new pope last year.
- 81 percent rate him highly on standing for traditional moral values, a priority for 49 percent.
- 62 percent praise him for "reforming the Vatican bureaucracy," a priority for 35 percent
- 50 percent praise him for "addressing the priest shortage," a priority for 36 percent

However, a top 2013 priority (cited by 70 percent of U.S. Catholics) was the need to address the sex-abuse scandal. On this point, Pope Francis scored praise with 54 percent of Catholics. That issue, said Smith, it is still "a glaring disappointment."

There is no measure on whether Catholics would have listed "addressing the needs and concerns of the poor" as a priority when Francis was elected because this is the first time Pew has asked the question.

But the fact that three in four Catholics praised Francis on this point shows that "Pope Francis is a pope who changed the questions," Smith said.

Alan Cooperman, director of Pew Religion Research, said Catholics are "not reacting to pathbreaking encyclicals or 'ex cathedra' pronouncements, because those haven't happened in the past year. But there have been statements and actions in the past year that clearly are meaningful to American Catholics—things like the pope's decision to live simply and forego some trappings of office, his washing the feet of teenagers, and his emphasis on addressing poverty."

Reese said, "Francis trying to change the mindset of the institutional church, to talk about the compassion and love and forgiveness found in God."

Perhaps the reason that Mass attendance has not risen, Reese said, is that "when people come back to church, they don't find Francis in the pulpit, they find same old same old. If they don't find a welcoming, loving community, they are going to turn around and walk back out again."

Even so, Reese said, the stable numbers on Mass attendance could be seen as “good news since we’ve had nothing but decline since the 1950s.”

Since the most observant are often the most conservative, said Reese, the survey findings undermine any argument that Catholics are flummoxed by Francis. “They’re not confused. They like him.”

The survey of 1,821 adults, including 351 Catholics, was conducted on cell and landlines Feb. 14–23. The margin of error is plus or minus 2.6 percentage points for overall results and 6 percentage points among Catholics.