Spirituality



Pope Francis celebrates Mass at the Vatican on Feb. 24, 2019. Francis celebrated a final Mass to conclude his extraordinary summit of Catholic leaders summoned to Rome for a tutorial on preventing clergy sexual abuse and protecting children from predator priests. The Mass was celebrated in the Sala Regia, one of the grand, frescoed reception rooms of the Apostolic Palace. (Giuseppe Lami/Pool Photo via AP)

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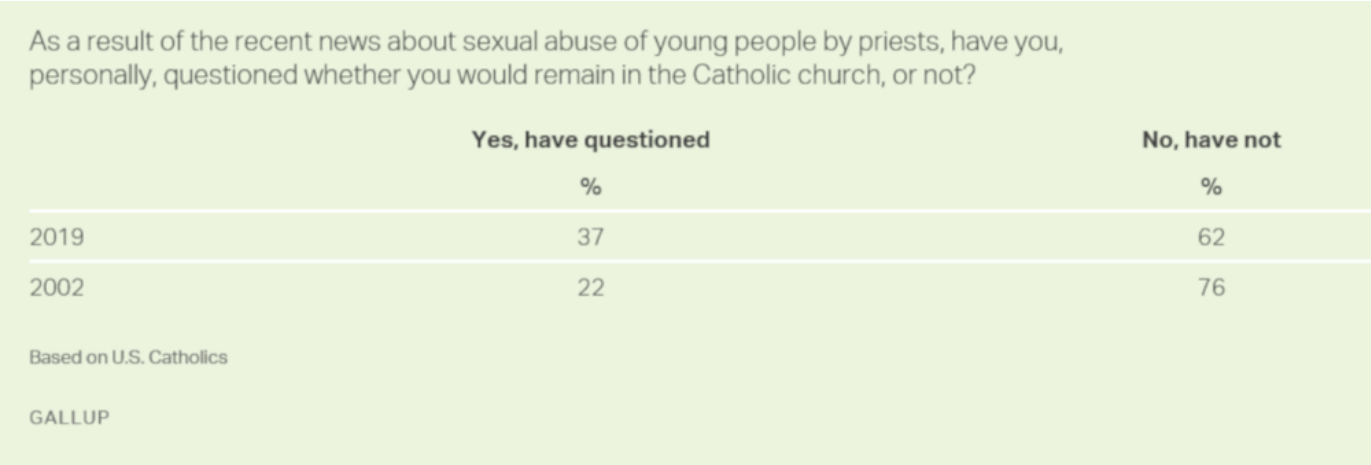
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A new survey reveals that more U.S. Catholics are questioning whether they should remain in the church today than when news of the "Spotlight" child sex abuse scandal broke in the Boston Archdiocese in 2002.

According to a poll released Wednesday (March 13) by Gallup, more than a third of U.S. Catholics — 37 percent — surveyed in January and February said they have questioned whether they should remain in the church. That's up from 22 percent in 2002, when The Boston Globe published its report detailing widespread child sex abuse by priests in the city.

Frequent churchgoers were less likely than other Catholics to say they are rethinking their affiliation with the faith this year. Only 22 percent of Catholics who attend church weekly today said they have considered leaving the faith, compared with 37 percent of those who attend nearly weekly or monthly and 46 percent of those who seldom or never attend.

However, all groups showed an increase of 10 percentage points or more compared with the 2002 polling. Back then, 12 percent of those who attended church weekly, 24 percent of those who attended nearly weekly or monthly and 29 percent of those who seldom or never attended had considered leaving 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

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Graphic via Gallup

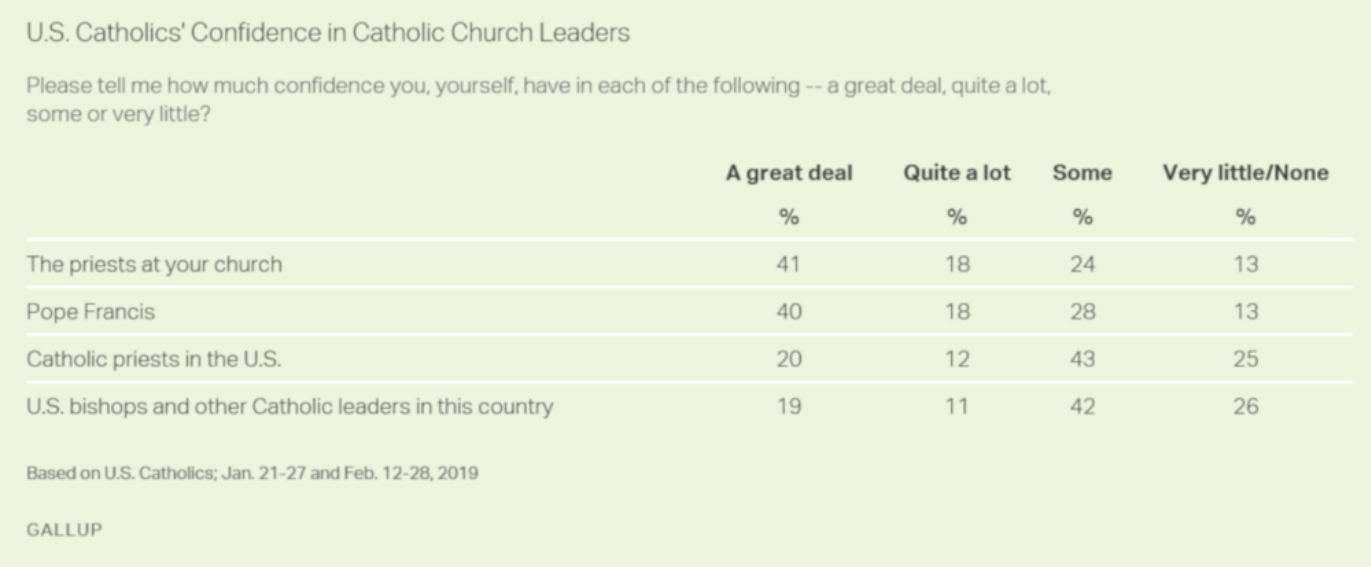
The shift comes in the wake of the 1,300-page grand jury report released by Pennsylvania's attorney general in August 2018, which included accounts of alleged sexual abuse by hundreds of Catholic priests against more than 1,000 children in that state over a 70-year span. At least 14 attorneys general in other states have since said they would launch their own investigations or reviews of clergy abuse, and federal authorities have initiated reviews as well.

In November 2018, police searched the offices of the Galveston-Houston Archdiocese — the see of Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, who is president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops — as part of an investigation into a priest accused of abuse in Texas.

The flurry of renewed coverage of the scandal was compounded by allegations of an abuse cover-up in Chile that led to the resignation of several bishops there last year; the conviction of Australian Cardinal George Pell in February on charges of sexually abusing two choirboys in the 1990s; and the defrocking of former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick after allegations that the onetime archbishop of Washington, D.C., sexually abused seminarians and a minor earlier in his career.

Pope Francis attempted to address the scandal in February by hosting a four-day conference at the Vatican on the subject, where prominent bishops heard from multiple abuse survivors and the pontiff called for an "all-out battle" against abuse in the church. However, many advocates for survivors left the gathering disappointed by what they saw as a lack of concrete action.

Even so, Gallup reports that most American Catholics still largely support Francis, with 58 percent saying they have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in him. Roughly the same amount — 59 percent — said they had the same level of confidence in the priest at their church, but only 30 percent said the same about U.S. bishops and other Catholic leaders in the country.



Graphic via Gallup

Differences in confidence levels arise when Catholics are broken out by church attendance. Among Catholics who attend church weekly, 86 percent said they had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the priests at their church, compared with 64 percent of those who attend weekly or monthly and 39 percent of those who never attend.

Notably, there was more consistent agreement among the groups about their confidence in Pope Francis, with 68 percent of Catholics who attend church weekly saying they had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in him, 61 percent who attend weekly or monthly saying so and 50 percent of those who never attend.

Gallup hasn’t asked the same question about confidence in the past for comparison. But it did release data in January showing that the percentage of U.S. Catholics who rate the honesty and ethical standards of the clergy as "very high" or "high" is at its lowest since at least 2004: Only 31 percent of Catholics rated clergy as such in 2018, an 18-point drop from 2017 and a 32-point drop from a 2008 spike in support.

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