News
Analysis



Pedestrians walk toward St. Stephen's Basilica in Budapest, Hungary, March 3, 2016. A recent census found a 30% drop in Hungary's Catholic population. (CNS/Reuters/Laszlo Balogh)



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A recent official census of religious identity in Hungary offered bad news for those concerned with the future of Christianity in central Europe.

For the first time, a majority of Hungarians (56.6%) failed to declare membership of a faith tradition, with 16.5% declaring "no religion" and a further 40.1% choosing not to answer the question at all.

While all the country's main denominations were hit badly, results for the Roman Catholic Church, historically the nation's majority tradition, were worst of all — a drop of 1.1 million (nearly 30%), compared to 2011. The numbers went from an estimated 3.69 million people identifying as Catholics in 2011 to 2.6 million today.

Combined with a smaller loss between 2001 and 2011, Hungary's Catholic population has shrunk an astounding 50% this century, to just 27.5% of the population.

> 'In Hungary, high levels of government material and symbolic support for religion in the name of political Christianity has been spectacularly ineffective.'
> —István Kamarás
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These facts contrast starkly with the rhetoric of Viktor Orbán, Hungary's far-right prime minister, who has described "Christian Hungary" as a supposed bulwark against immigration of Muslims and other religious minorities into Europe.

The new statistics may also raise new questions about Hungarian government support for Catholic, and other Christian, churches across the country.

In recent years, large sums of public money, and many state services, have been transferred to the churches. The government has paid for building or refurbishing about 3,000 places of worship and more than doubled the number of church schools (publicly funded at a level estimated at 3:1 relative to secular equivalents). In 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government pumped 285 million Euros

($302 million) of special funding into state-favored churches, but only 140 million ($148 million) into Hungary's struggling health system.

The causes of church decline are complex, and in part, reflect long-term trends favoring private spiritual practice that cannot be ascribed to the 2010 election victory of Orbán's right-wing Fidesz party.

However, the dramatic rise in non-response (more than non-belief) to the survey has caused some commentators to wonder if immediate problems in Hungary's faith communities may have contributed.



An illuminated St. Stephen's Basilica in Budapest, Hungary, is seen at night March 3, 2016. In recent years, public money has paid for building or refurbishing about 3,000 places of worship. (CNS/Reuters/Laszlo Balogh)

"Sociologists of religion aren't at all surprised by these [census] results. Our surveys have been indicating this outcome for some time. Unfortunately, our warnings weren't heeded by either state authorities or the leadership of the various churches," retired university professor István Kamarás told NCR.

"It seems quite likely that some of the non-respondents … expressed their criticism of the government and the church leaderships by skipping the religion question — though we'd need separate research to be sure," said Kamarás, retired chair of the Department of Anthropology and Ethics at Veszprém University.

The academic is wary of asserting that anger with the government has driven church decline but observes: "What we can say with confidence is that in Hungary, high levels of government material and symbolic support for religion in the name of political Christianity has been spectacularly ineffective."

Catholic theologian Rita Perentfavi goes further.

"I believe this is a conscious protest by believers," she told NCR. "After all, 40% of the population didn't respond to the question on religious affiliation. Among them, there must be many faithful Catholics who've completely turned away from their church, but not their faith, in the last decade."

Pope Francis listens to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán after his arrival at the internati

Pope Francis listens to Zsolt Semjén, Hungary's Deputy Prime Minister, after his arrival at the international airport in Budapest, Hungary, April 28. (CNS/Vatican Media)

This, Perentfavi said, is "because they're in a serious identity crisis … they cannot identify with a church that has completely turned away from Gospel values by working so closely with [Orbán]."

Perentfavi, a Hungarian who is a researcher in Old Testament studies at Graz University in Austria, lays particular blame on the example of Hungarian Cardinal Péter Erdő, who has led the Archdiocese of Esztergom-Budapest since 2003 and is sometimes seen by supporters abroad as a possible conservative successor to Francis.

"This kind of institutional failure, the loss of about 30% of Catholic believers in a decade, has inevitably to be seen in significant part as the responsibility of that institution's number one leader," she said. "In our case that's Péter Erdő."

Related: Pope's trip to Hungary may test Orbán's aims to ally with both Trump and Francis

Hungary's government has essentially dealt with disappointing census results about religion in the country by avoiding direct comment on them. Nevertheless, remarks made recently by Miklós Soltész, Hungary's state secretary for church affairs, betrayed sensitivity.

Speaking in the west Hungarian town of Kőszeg at an event to celebrate the publicly funded redevelopment of several local church buildings at a cost of some 6 Billion HUF ($16.3 million), Soltész dismissed skeptics who might question such state largesse toward the church.

"We should not deal with those people," he said. Without mentioning the census, Soltész articulated a counter narrative to the data. "According to a recent survey, 80% of Hungarians believe in the Ten Commandments," he said.

Unease was also evident in how the new census data was released by Hungary's Central Statistical Office.

"The context suggested embarrassment," said Zoltán Laky, a Catholic who is the associate editor of the independent online portal Válasz Online.

Laky said the publication of the data was first delayed, and then released with short notice on Sept. 26. He attributed the lack of information about the coming release date as an attempt to minimize news coverage of the census numbers.

A person prays inside the Catholic basilica in Esztergom, Hungary, April 14, 2021.

A person prays inside the Catholic basilica in Esztergom, Hungary, April 14, 2021. Catholicism, historically the nation's majority tradition, saw a drop of nearly 30% of people who identified as Catholic in a recent national census. (CNS/Reuters/Bernadett Szabo)

Friend and foe alike expect nothing to change in the behavior of the government. Speaking ahead of the results, Ágoston Mráz, director of a think tank associated with Orbán's Fidesz party, speculated generous state funding would continue regardless of the new data.

"There's a chance those numbers won't be very nice," he told journalists at a briefing in April. But he did not expect a change in funding levels because "it's one of the cornerstones of this government to support the churches … it doesn't matter if

they're popular or not."

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Péter Urfi, a religious affairs journalist at online portal 444, also thinks subsidy levels will continue, but out of pragmatism not principle.

Fidesz's long-term electoral strategy works, Urfi says, on a "core vote" principle - predicated on mobilizing about 30% of the voting age population.

"Spending on the churches is important to that core vote — including for people who don't actually go to church," Urfi said.

Pope Francis in Hungary

Pope Francis visited Hungary April 28-30. Read our coverage here.

A radical rethinking of the church's approach to either the government or its pastoral strategy seems unlikely based on the hierarchy's initial response to the census results.

An official statement from Hungary's Catholic bishops commenting on the census expressed pleasure in noting that "more than two-thirds of our fellow citizens who stated religious affiliation declared themselves to belong to the Catholic Church" but noted that regrettably "international trends can also be observed in the census data, and our country is no exception."

Perentfalvi is pessimistic about the chances for longer term change. "Unfortunately, I fear this shocking result won't sober the leaders of the Catholic Church ... the church's entire financing is in the hands of the government, it is in a straitjacketed, completely dependent position," she said.