Opinion
Guest Voices



A file photo shows a catechumen being baptized during the Easter Vigil. (OSV News/Texas Catholic Herald/James Ramos)



Thomas Reese

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @thomasreeseSJ

Religion News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

April 10, 2026
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Across the country, scores of catechumens were baptized into the Catholic Church for Easter this year. Many of these new Catholics were young people. Even though precise figures won't be available for some time, there is enough anecdotal evidence from both pastors and secular media to draw attention.

Whether this amounts to a Catholic revival remains to be seen. I hope so, but I doubt it. In the latest year for which we have data, 2024, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, a Georgetown University-affiliated research center that studies the Catholic Church, reports that 34,501 adults were baptized into the Catholic Church. This is up from the pandemic year, 2020, when only 25,356 were baptized, but still down from 2019, when 35,799 adults were baptized.

And the numbers of adult baptisms in the past were significantly higher, according to CARA: 118,622 in 1964; 80,035 in 1974; 87,996 in 1984; 66,886 in 1994; 76,605 in 2004; and 42,751 in 2014.

Clearly, the number of baptisms has been generally decreasing since 1964. It would take a huge increase in adult baptisms to get anywhere near the numbers we had then. And until that happens, we should not speak of a Catholic revival.

Since then, the number of priests and religious has also declined significantly, while the number of people who have left the church has gone up. Church attendance is also way down, which research has found consistently.

Some have personal explanations for these declines. Reactionaries blame the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council, conservatives blame the excesses of liberal pastors and theologians, liberals say that Vatican II did not go far enough, and reformers blame clericalism and the sex abuse crisis.

Advertisement

All of these explanations are too simplistic. The decline began long before clerical sex abuse became known. And if liberal excesses drove people out of the church, why did the numbers continue to decline during the papacies of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI? If the Catholic Church needs to be more liberal or conservative, why are both liberal and conservative churches in the United States seeing declines?

And for those who think that people leave the church over doctrine, it should be noted that many people stay Catholic even when they disagree with the church about issues like birth control, abortion, migration, women priests, peace and social justice. It is also highly probable that many people joining the church disagree with it on one or more of these issues. Perhaps doctrine is not as important as bishops and priests think.

Catholics do have some unique features that have changed and probably had an impact on numbers. Prior to Vatican II, non-Catholic spouses tended to convert. At a minimum, they had to promise to raise their children Catholic. Catholics also went to church at high rates because the church told them that if they missed Mass on Sunday, they committed a mortal sin and would go to hell. Research shows that if a married couple is of the same religion and they go to church as a family on Sunday, their children are more likely to stay with their church.

In Europe, where Christianity thrived for centuries, we find an even more secular and unchurched population than in the U.S. We thought we were exceptional, but perhaps we were just slower to change.

Related: Is Europe witnessing a young Christian 'quiet revival'? The data is contested

We know, for example, that rural areas are more religious than urban. And even in cities, people with strong roots in their ethnic neighborhoods are also more religious. Those who move away from family and neighbors also tend to lose contact with their religion.

In villages and ethnic neighborhoods, if you were not at church, the neighbors noticed and commented. In the past, social pressure kept people going to church

even when they no longer wanted to. Now, nobody cares if you don't go to church. It is a personal choice, a commitment you have to make on your own.

In countries where Christianity is part of the cultural fabric, churches become lazy because they have a guaranteed audience. Like monopolies, they do not listen to their customers (congregants), they do not innovate, and their marketing (evangelizing) becomes boring.

Young people today say that they are interested in spirituality and are longing for community. Almost by definition, that is what Christianity is supposed to provide.

The Catholic Church has a rich tradition of spirituality, but it needs to do more than simply repackage old products. Contemporary spirituality needs to respect developments in psychology, science and culture.

The church also needs to be more welcoming if people are to see a community that they want to join. This means more than offering coffee and doughnuts after Mass. The church must be a place where people are spiritually nourished and feel welcomed and at home. That would cause a real Catholic revival.