

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

November 13, 2013 at 9:18am

Rise in Italian Catholic Church attendance attributed to 'Francis effect'

by Eric J. Lyman by Religion News Service

Rome — First, the name "Francesco" leapfrogged to No. 1 on the list of the most popular baby names in Italy.

Then the city of Rome reported a tourism boom, mostly from Latin America.

Now there's word Roman Catholic church attendance is climbing throughout Italy.

Blame it on "the Francis effect."

Italy's Center for Studies on New Religions reported Sunday that around half of the 250 priests it surveyed reported a significant rise in church attendance since Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio became Pope Francis in March.

"If we project these findings nationally, and if half of the parishes have been touched by the Francis effect, then we're talking about hundreds of thousands of people returning to the churches," said Massimo Introvigne, the center's director and a professor at Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University.

The findings come as Opinioni, a political polling company, reported Monday that more than four in five Italians had a "positive" or "extremely positive" opinion of the new pope.

In the poll, Opinioni asked for opinions on 21 public figures in Italy -- the pope, sports stars, politicians, entertainers, business figures and others. Respondents were asked to place them in five categories: extremely positive, positive, neutral, negative, extremely negative. Eighty-two percent rated the pope in one of the top two categories, far outdistancing all other public figures.

The latest findings fit into the popular narrative of Francis, who has earned headlines for his humble and popular style and statements. Roman police say average attendance at papal audiences in St. Peter's Square are on the rise, and souvenir sellers have been quoted in the local press as saying business has improved since March despite Italy's moribund economy.

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