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How U.S. Catholics View Pope Francis

In Their Own Words

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION
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Each Wednesday and Saturday evening, Naomi Magel and her husband attend Mass at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Elgin, Texas. After the service, the couple takes their pastor, the Rev. George Joseph, out for something to eat. Over the past year, one subject has come up in conversation again and again.

“We talk about Pope Francis just about every time we have dinner,” said Magel, a 67-year-old school nurse. In February, the three marveled at news that the pope [had renewed his Argentinian identification card](#), just as any of his fellow countrymen might have done.

“He is the poor man’s pope,” she said. “He does his own thing. He’s a more normal, down-to-earth person, and he seems connected with the people. There’s no flamboyance.”

Magel is not alone in her regard for Pope Francis. Fully 85% of adult Catholics in the U.S. say they have a favorable view of him, as discussed in the [new Pew Research survey](#). We wanted to understand a little more about the popularity of the pope, so we asked respondents if they would be willing to elaborate on their answers to our survey questions.

We called some of those Catholics back for longer conversations about their faith and their take on the new leader of their church at his one-year mark in office. The answers we got are not meant to be comprehensive or representative of all Catholics, but they are illustrative of how some American Catholics feel about Pope Francis.

Pew Research surveys conducted over the past year found no change in the share of U.S. adults who identify as Catholic, or in self-reported rates of Mass attendance. But about a quarter of those responding to the new survey (26%) say they feel “more excited” about their faith than they did a year ago, far outnumbering the 11% who say they feel “less excited.”

“It just feels like the church is now focusing on what I think is important and less on political issues,” said Vicky Rybnick, a 21-year-old college student in Connecticut who attends Mass two or three times per week. “I think what’s important is reducing poverty, helping the homeless and children who have been given up for adoptions and other at-risk populations, as opposed to fighting against gay marriage and abortion and contraception. ... So Pope Francis has done a good

job bringing the right things back into focus, and that has certainly changed the way I feel about my church.”

In our survey, 76% of American Catholics said they thought the pope was doing an excellent or good job addressing the needs of the poor, and 62% said he is doing a good job of reforming the Vatican bureaucracy.

Francis “has put his focus on making the church an institution of service,” Rybnick said.

David F., a 69-year-old from California who is retired from the manufacturing business and attends Mass several times per week, said he liked that Francis had [formed an eight-member advisory council of cardinals](#). “That’ll cut a couple layers of management out of the system,” he said.

Naomi Magel agreed: “He’s taken control of the Vatican. He’s cleaning house and straightening out things that were being ruled by people other than pope.”

The pope received lower marks for his handling of the clergy sexual abuse crisis, which is now more than a decade old and continues to weigh on the minds of American Catholics. In our survey, 54% of Catholics gave Francis an excellent or good rating for his handling of the crisis. One year ago, 70% said the abuse scandal should be a top priority for the pope.

“The priest child sex abuse scandal and all the payouts to settle suits are the biggest problems right now,” said Lydia Wiley, 56, a Pennsylvania attorney who does not attend Mass but considers herself a “cultural Catholic.”

“It’s his biggest challenge going forward,” said Ted Marron, a 27-year-old freight handler from Pennsylvania who attends Mass twice a month. “I think he’s handled it well. It’s a tough situation. I couldn’t really ask much more of him.”

Support for Change

In our survey, large numbers of Catholics said they wanted to see some changes in church teachings. Large majorities say the church should allow birth control (77%), allow priests to marry (72%) and ordain women as priests (68%). Some Catholics we spoke to said they believed Francis could spark that change.

Pope Francis “has taken a more liberal turn and I think that’s wonderful,” said Elizabeth Lawn, a 29-year-old nursing student in Indiana who attends Mass a couple times per year. “I think that’s a good direction for the Catholic faith. It makes the church more relevant for our times.”

William Glover, 51, a probation officer in Illinois who attends Mass weekly, said he thinks Francis is “more open than all the other popes.”

“He’s open-minded,” Glover said. “He’s opened the books, the finances of the church, and he speaks what’s on his mind.”

Lydia Wiley, the Pennsylvania attorney, said she thought Francis’ popularity stemmed from his willingness “to function outside of the protocol for the pope.”

“He’s driving his own car, living with other priests,” she said. “That’s what I like about him. There [are] none of the trappings of affluence that you usually see.”

Some Catholics told us that they hoped the goodwill directed toward Francis would extend to religion more broadly.

“Over the last five years, there’s been a huge stigma about religion in general, and I haven’t seen that as much in the last year,” said Amanda Brush, a 30-year-old business owner from Florida. “He’s cancelled out some of that negativity that religion has carried with it.”

Indiana nursing student Elizabeth Lawn said she had stopped attending Mass regularly because she felt church teachings were too strict and the Mass itself felt antiquated and insular.

“The church needs to change with the times and to fit people’s lives better,” she said. “I think Pope Francis might understand this and might be bringing the Catholic faith into the 21st century.”

Seven-in-ten Catholics say that Pope Francis represents a major change in direction for the church, according to our survey, and most of those who express this view say he represents a change for the better.

David F. the California retiree, said Francis was “taking the church back in the direction it should have been on.”

“It’s a 2,000-year-old tradition getting stirred up a little bit, so that’s exciting to me,” he said.

Michael Shimko, an 83-year-old retiree in Pennsylvania who attends Mass four times a week, said the pope “needs to get Catholic people believing again.”

“Too many people say they’re Catholic, but [they] don’t know what that means,” Shimko said. “Francis needs to work to get us back in the fold.”

Texas school nurse Naomi Magel said she was confident Pope Francis was a force for change who would bring the church “back to the way we had done things before.”

“He’s going to bring us back to the core values of the church and do things for the people, and not so much the politics or the business of the church,” she said. “And I’m looking forward to that. He’s like a real person, but a special real person.”

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