

ORTHODOX V. HETERODOX REPORT

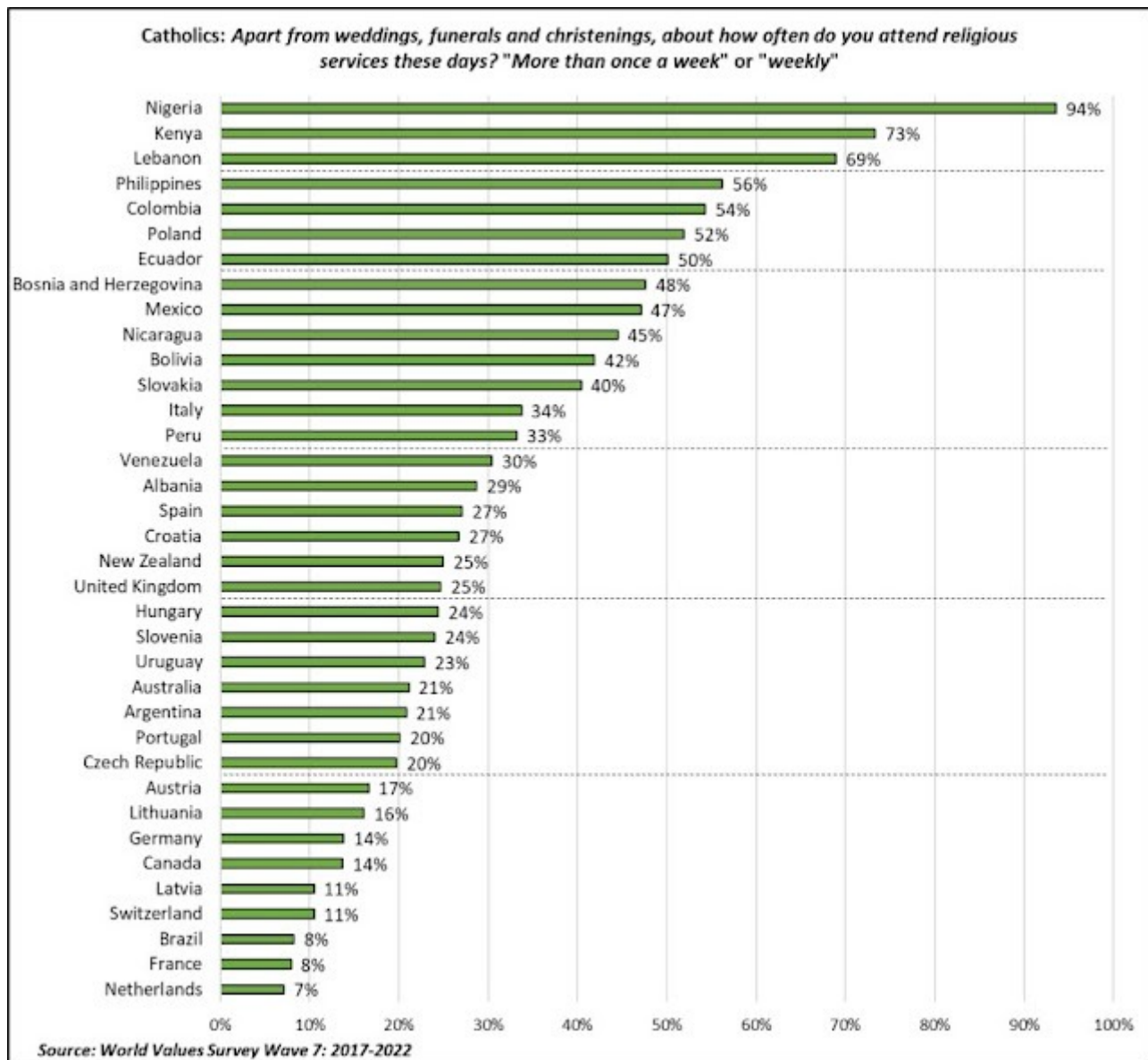
This is the article that appeared in the October 2023 edition of Catalyst, our monthly journal. The date that prints out reflects the day that it was uploaded to our website. For a more accurate date of when the article was first published, check out the news release, [here](#).

Time and again, commentators have observed that Catholic communities that adhere to the orthodoxies of the faith tend to flourish while those that embrace heterodoxies usually diminish. Below are several examples that highlight this trend.

Mass Attendance Globally

As seen on the chart below from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), major discrepancies exist between how well Catholics attend Mass in different nations. A common explanation for this is more affluent societies tend to decline in religiosity. However, it should be noted that nations closer to the top of the list do better at observing orthodoxy, while those near the bottom are more inclined to embrace heterodoxy. In the following sections, select country profiles will demonstrate this point.





Nigeria

Catholics in Nigeria face significant hardships that most Westerners can barely comprehend. Last year more Catholics were martyred for their faith in Nigeria than anywhere else in the world. Islamist militants, such as Boko Haram, the Islamic State's West African Province, and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, prey on Nigeria's Catholic population.

Yet, despite these grave conditions, the Catholic Church in Nigeria remains strong. While approximately 20 million people (roughly 13 percent of the population) are Catholic, church attendance among Catholics in Nigeria is 94 percent. This is the highest rate of Mass attendance in the world. The Catholic

Bishops' Conference of Nigeria is noted for its adherence to Catholic orthodoxy, and the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter, a more traditional Catholic society, flourishes in the African nation, as well. In the face of tremendous human suffering, the Church in Nigeria remains strong thanks to its faithfulness to Catholic teachings.

Germany

In many ways the Catholic Church in Germany is the polar opposite of the Church in Nigeria. For instance, the Archdiocese of Cologne is the wealthiest Catholic diocese in the world not only because of its historic importance but also because of the German church taxes that provide a portion of people's income taxes to recognized religions with significant subsidies. For that matter, many German dioceses have significant wealth due to these subsidies.

Yet even with this strong financial base, the Catholic Church in Germany has rapidly declined. While CARA averages Mass attendance for German Catholics between 2017 to 2022 to be approximately 14 percent, local statistics indicate that in 2022 only 5.7 percent of Catholics were weekly in the pews.

In 2019, the Central Committee of German Catholics and the German bishops' conference began a collaborative effort known as "The Synodal Way." This provided a forum for activists with more heterodox views to promote making substantive changes to Church teachings. Throughout the process the heterodox advocates dominated the proceedings and called for more and more significant departures from Catholic traditions.

Ultimately, when the process concluded in March of 2023, "The Synodal Way" overwhelmingly endorsed measures changing Catholic practices on transgender ideology, accepting the ordination of women to the sacramental diaconate, approving the blessing of same-sex relationships, normalizing lay preaching, and asking Rome to reexamine the discipline of

priestly celibacy.

Brazil

Following Vatican II, Latin America became a hotbed for liberation theology. As its name would suggest, liberation theology is a Christian theological approach emphasizing the liberation of the oppressed and downtrodden.

In practice, though, liberation theology replaces Catholic orthodoxy with strong Marxist overtones. As Friar Clodovis Boff, brother of renowned liberation theologian and former Catholic priest Leonardo Boff, warns in his new book, *The Crisis in the Catholic Church and Liberation Theology*, that adherents to this heterodoxy fall “into utilitarianism or functionalism in relation to the Word of God and to theology in general.” In other words, political and socio-economic concerns trump spiritual ones under a liberation theology interpretation.

For this reason, under St. John Paul II, the Vatican’s doctrinal office feared that the spread of liberation theology would cause irrevocable damage to the Church. Prior to becoming Pope Benedict XVI, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger regarded liberation theology as a “singular heresy” and a “fundamental threat” to Catholicism.

Like many other Latin American countries, the Church in Brazil embraced liberation theology. In the 1960s, it began to make major inroads among the Brazilian population. At the time, approximately 90 percent of the country was Catholic. However, after several decades of liberation theology, Catholic Brazilians now count for 51 percent of the total population. Further, less than one in ten (eight percent) of Brazil’s Catholics attend Mass weekly. This is one of the lowest levels of Mass attendance in the world.

American Seminaries

As a general rule, the more orthodox an institution is the more seminarians it attracts. Conversely, the more heterodox an institution has become the fewer candidates for the priesthood will attend.

For instance, the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University and the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry are two prominent seminaries that are more heterodox in their nature. Respectively, in the 2022-2023 academic year, their enrollments were 34 and 32 seminarians. Out of all 39 seminaries in the country, these are the 29th and 30th highest attended.

However, more orthodox seminaries attract significantly more seminarians. Institutions such as Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Maryland, Notre Dame Seminary in Louisiana, St. John Vianney Theological Seminary in Colorado, St. Vincent de Paul Seminary in Florida, and St. Meinrad School of Theology in Indiana are all orthodox and in the 2022-2023 academic year all had over 100 seminarians in attendance.

Sisters of Charity

Founded by St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in New York City, the Sisters of Charity were once a prominent order of nuns that worked to help the poor and promote the Catholic faith. However, over the last two centuries, the Sisters of Charity began to embrace heterodoxy.

Ultimately, this led to their numbers dwindling. According to the current congregation president Sister Donna Dodge, "in 21 years, no one entered and stayed." The median age of the sisters today is 83 years old, and there are 154 members left in the community. Demographic statistics indicate that they may have approximately 35 members left in the next 15 years. As a result, in April of 2023, the Sisters of Charity voted to stop accepting new members and embark on a "path to completion" of their mission.

This decline appears linked to the Sisters of Charity embracing heterodoxy. Several traditional orders of nuns have thrived while maintaining Catholic orthodoxy. For instance, the Dominican Sisters of Mary, Mother of the Eucharist was founded in 1997. Yet in just over a quarter of a century, these more traditional sisters have grown to 150 members with an average age of 35 and the average age of women joining the order is 21. Similarly, the Franciscan Sisters of Renewal and the Sisters of Life, founded in 1988 and 1991 respectively, continue to grow and thrive attracting new, younger members while remaining steadfast in upholding the orthodoxy of the Catholic Church.