

A return to tradition: religious resurgence in the United States

REPORT 17 | CEU CEFAS

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ISBN: 979-13-87860-51-6
Layout: CEU Ediciones
Printing: CEU Ediciones
Printed in Spain

Published by: CEU Ediciones
Calle Julián Romea, 18
28003 Madrid | España
Phone: (+34) 91 514 05 73
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The San Pablo CEU University Foundation is an entity registered in the Register of Foundations under number 60 /
Tax Identification Code (G-28423275).

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Executive summary

In recent years it has generally been considered that the United States is set firmly on a path to secularisation. Yet the data available, and the way in which religious communities have developed, depict a more complex scenario. Far from a homogeneous decline in faith, the country is experiencing an internal realignment of religious devotion where, rather than emphasising numerical growth, the onus is on strengthening its identity. This report suggests that part of this process is due to the fact that tradition has become a major factor in ensuring that religion continues to thrive.

According to general statistics, in recent decades, there has been a sustained decline in identifying as a Christian in the United States. However, Catholicism shows a differential scenario, remaining stable at around 20% of the adult population, and this within the context of a marked decline in numerous Protestant denominations. Furthermore, at the present date, almost one in every two US adults states that they have a personal or family connection with Catholicism, which indicates a cultural and social presence way beyond its strictly demographic weight. Faith is in fashion.

Alongside this quantitative trend, there have been significant qualitative transformations. Although there has not been a notable rise in the number of baptisms, there has however been a gradual recovery of organised religious practice. Following the huge drop in attendance at Mass, due to the pandemic, there has been an ongoing recovery, particularly in parishes with a clear liturgical identity. At the same time, other components of the life in faith –such as confession or participation in parish life– have experienced a sustained growth, which points to an interior consolidation rather than a superficial rise.

The data compiled throughout this report has shown some significant phenomena:

- A modest yet continuing recovery of Sunday worship concentrated in communities that favoured liturgical tradition as opposed to stagnation or decline of parishes with a relativist approach.

- Clear signs of vocational strength in specific dioceses, where the number of seminarians and ordinations broadly exceeds the national average, confirming a direct correlation between doctrinal identity, liturgical life and a wealth of vocations.
- The growth of lay movements and university activities, particularly among the young, in a context in which sociological studies have shown that younger generations are attracted, not by ambiguous religious attitudes but rather by firm and consistent communities.
- The decisive role of Hispanic immigration, which has contributed both to maintaining the demographic heft of Catholicism and to renewing its community fabric. The United States Church has thus become a younger, more familiar and participatory Church, in sharp contrast to the religious ageing of other western contexts.
- The growing presence of Catholics in the public sphere, from the Supreme Court to Congress and the federal administration. In fact, according to recent data, approximately 87% of members of Congress declare themselves as Christians, which helps to keep the public arena familiar with religion.

The main conclusion is clear: the United States is not witnessing the end of faith but instead is observing its redistribution. The apparent religious decline in actual fact conceals a change of direction, in which tradition is no longer seen as a burden but rather a source of renewal. In short, the North American experience confirms that in a country that appeared to be set on an irrevocable path to complete secularisation, tradition has become the driving force of a religious renaissance that, rather than growing upwards has turned inward, believing that only by discovering how to establish one's roots is it possible to be raised up again.

*Tradition is the guarantee of the future and not a museum piece.
It is what makes the Church grow from the ground upwards, like a tree: the roots.*

Pope Francis

1. Introduction

It is easy to look around and see that religion is in fashion. In recent months, hundreds of newspaper headlines, television programmes, podcasts, advertisements and social networks have added to the current avalanche of spirituality. With modern man shorn of every certainty, faith has once more become a helping hand to be grasped by millions of people.

Yet could this return to faith simply be a passing fad like so much else today? What is in store for this extremely traditional new phenomenon in the years to come? Will so many excellent intentions actually be embodied in concrete results?

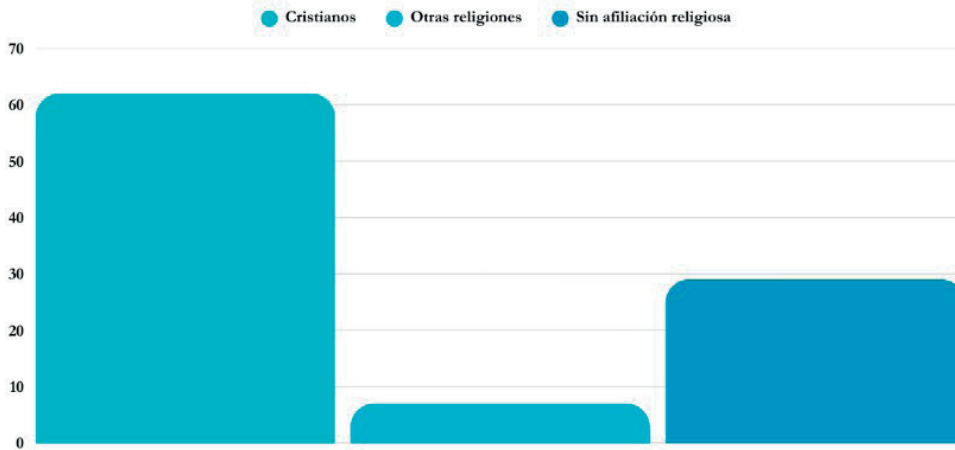
Just a few months ago the Catholic Church attempted to provide an answer to these questions with some specific facts. The 2023 edition of the *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae*¹, confirms what is currently the word on the streets, namely that in the space of one year the Church obtained a total increase of 15,881,000 new adherents. Although in Europe the downward trend has been reversed— although in moderation it must be said —the African continent has continued to lead these new evangelisation figures with eight million converts. And it is closely followed by America, in that during the last recorded period, the American continent has shown a growth of five million faithful, thus establishing it as the most Catholic region in the world —accounting for 64.2% of its population²—.

Turning from the global perspective and addressing the specific case of United States, the available data offer some decisive clues to the reasons for this transformation. According to recent studies, 62% of the United States population consider themselves to be Christian compared to 7% who identify with other religions, and close to 29% who state that they have no religious affiliation. These figures, which at first sight seem to indicate a uniform decline in faith, acquire a different meaning when looked at in perspective. The *Religious Landscape Study* of the Pew Research Center shows that Christianity —from Catholicism to the different Protestant denominations— has managed, with moderate variations, to maintain its relative hold on the population as a whole.

1 The *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae* (ASE) is the official statistical yearbook of the Catholic Church published by the Holy See through the Church's Central Statistics Office. The statistical series provide the most authoritative primary source for any demographic and pastoral analysis of the Church. These are published annually together with the *Annuario Pontificio*.

2 Ibid.

Composición religiosa de la sociedad estadounidense (en porcentaje)



Fuente: Religious Landscape Study, Pew Research Center (elaboración propia).

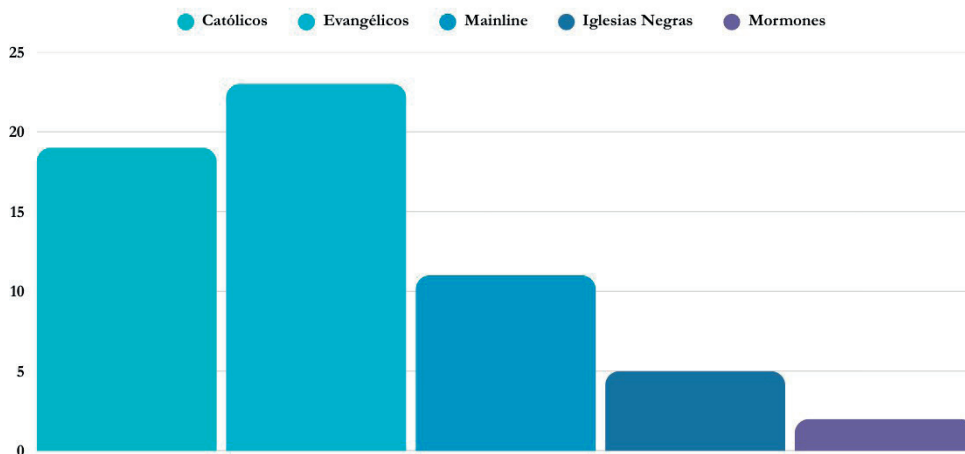
[Religious make up of United States Society (percentages)

Christians * Other Religions * No religious affiliation

Source:]

On closer examination of the internal composition of this 62% of US citizens who declare themselves Christians, the religious map shows some significant details, such as the fact that 23% of the population identify with evangelical churches, whereas 11% belong to the *mainline churches*, which historically have been predominant, but which today are in clear decline. In addition, 5% identify with Black Protestant churches, and 2% are recognised as members of the Church of Jesus Christ and the Latter Day Saints- namely the Mormons –and the growing 19% who identify as Catholic is a particularly relevant percentage.

Comparativa de las confesiones cristianas en Estados Unidos (en porcentaje)



Fuente: Religious Landscape Study, Pew Research Center (elaboración propia).

[Comparison of Christian denominations in the United States (percentages)

Catholic * Evangelical * Mainline * Black churches * Mormons

Source:]

All the statistics point to one reality, namely that churches are emptying in some places and in others they are filling up as never before. Devotion is transforming, in transition, changing tone and form.

However, is this change totally unforeseen? Can we not find some recognisable patterns behind this phenomenon of spirituality? Are there perhaps specific reasons why some churches are thriving once more precisely when the world we inhabit seems to be increasingly secular?

A long hard look at the American continent provides us with some answers. For quite some years now it has been a given that the modern age will bring with it an inevitable departure from religion. Technological progress, globalisation and the expansion of liberal democracies appeared to depict a horizon where religion would be no more than a pleasant memory, the antiquated prerogative of our older generation. Yet recent history in America –that of an ever changing north and an historically fervent south– has given the lie to this forecast. Not only has religion failed to disappear but it is changing in focus and has instead gone back to its roots.

This is one of the keys to this upsurge in supernatural belief. It is not that religion is growing as a nameless trend with no framework or its own seal of identity. It is not a question of approaching the enigmatic figure of Christ with renewed admiration. In the numbers involved in this religious renaissance a return to tradition plays a significant role, in that while a part of Christianity has opted to change with the times, another sector has chosen to remain faithful to tradition. As a result, it is not a case of indiscriminate rise in religiosity but rather that those more radical churches –with their prized etymology of *going back to their roots*, are prospering, whereas the more flexible denominations, with their tendency to accept the challenges of our times, have become watered down in a kind of devotion based on feelings and good intentions.

In the United States this phenomenon is clearly perceived, not only in terms of statistics but in the parishes in those Catholic and evangelical communities that have managed to retain a distinct religious identity –preserving the liturgy, recalling the moral teaching of the Church, unashamedly defining the Christian anthropology regarding life and the family– and it is these who attract the faithful to their ranks, especially the young. Conversely, those with an ideologised version of the faith, those who have in recent years made the pulpit a political tribunal or have replaced the power of the Gospel with social guidelines, have been left to languish. Faith has not disappeared as a result of this dynamic, but instead there has been a switch in direction, in that rather than the flame dying out, it is simply burning with force in different churches.

Therefore, what at first sight seemed to be a religious decline is, in fact, a restructuring of the faith. The United States in particular is witnessing a spiritual renaissance that is not expressed in new beliefs but in a renewal, by going back to its roots. It is no surprise that in times of moral confusion, existential emptiness and uprootedness, traditional values will once more provide a refuge. However, what is surprising is that paradoxically, orthodoxy is now a novelty.

2. Back to the roots

Despite this orthodoxy being *always old yet always new*, it still prompts a studied incredulity in many spheres. Aside from any consideration of the conservative nature of faith, speaking of tradition and orthodoxy within contemporary Christianity does not from its freshness, nor does it seek refuge in a condemnatory nostalgia. Quite the opposite, as Pope Benedict XVI stated «Tradition is not the transmission of things or words, a collection of things long dead. It is a living river which connects us to the origins, living river in which the origins are present, the great river which leads us to the door of eternity»³. Brilliant words that enable us to recall that this return to religious orthodoxy is not a backward step but a means of living better in the present. It is about remaining faithful to a legacy that has the unexpected force of novelty.

In the American context, this resurgence of orthodoxy is seen as a determining factor for understanding the behaviour of religious trends, namely, those churches that have opted to defend Tradition are seen as more lively and eloquent, while those that have watered down those traditional values in the name of modernity or cultural assimilation with the present times are witnessing a fall in followers. Although many see this orthodoxy from a modern and slightly frivolous standpoint, viewing with a somewhat sardonic smile, those who have embraced it have found it to provide an effective compass when responding to contemporary challenges.

So what does *traditional* mean in this religious context? Firstly, it means support for what Christian anthropology has always taught, namely that a human being has complete dignity from the moment of their conception to their natural death, that the family formed by a man and woman is not a fleeting cultural option but rather a fundamental human element, and that society should be built around those values, and should not oppose them. Secondly, it involves recognising that our fluid and fragmented modernity raises legitimate questions, but requires responses with roots that go deeper than itself. And finally, it requires understanding that the liturgy, worship and the community are not minor accessories to the faith but irreplaceable channels through which tradition enriches the present.

³ Benedict XVI, General Audience, 3 May 2006. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/es/audiences/2006/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20060503.html

When this, let us call it, triptych of orthodoxy is maintained and it is assumed with clarity and without the histrionics of nostalgia, a virtuous conversion of tradition occurs, it is no longer something that is simply conserved –and as such we cannot speak of religious conservatism– but something that revives and extends into the future. This position, which is increasingly prominent in various manifestations of Christianity, is opposed to premeditated overlooking of orthodoxy or the censure of tradition. The poet Julio Martínez-Mesanza refers to this beautifully in his Exaltation of *the rite*: «Who fails to understand the reason for the rite, / who fails to understand majesty and gesture / will never recognise human stature, / their vain god will be contingency. / Who degrades form and then delivers / neutral imitations to the people, / in order to be considered a free man, / has no god, no homeland and no tradition»⁴.

This *futile contingency* is perhaps most evident in North America. It is precisely here that in recent years there has been a growth of young people and families in those Catholic communities that have recovered or preserved a scrupulous liturgical identity, who have maintained the moral teaching of the Church and who have consistently defended Christian anthropology. Recent surveys carried out by Pew Research Center⁵ indicate that 47% of US adults have some connection with the Catholic faith, while the number of Catholics who attend weekly mass is around 24%, according to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA)⁶. All the statistics mentioned throughout the report suggest that traditional identity is unambiguous, in that it correlates with a deeper religious sense.

Exactly the same happens with *religious modernism* in that when the faith adopts conduct that prioritises cultural assimilation –embracing wholeheartedly social and ideological causes, diluting the defence of the natural family in a kind of *everything goes* or relativising a person’s vision– what frequently occurs is that the community stagnates. Or it takes giant steps backwards. In the south of the continent this dynamic has its own nuances pertinent to Hispano American Catholicism. Following decades of camaraderie with liberation theology, *indigenismo* –«Indianism»– and various other progressive streams, the Church to its surprise and dismay is seeing how some communities are losing their power in the face of more attractive evangelical and protestant churches which have boldly assumed a defence of tradition.

Theresa Farnan, researcher for the Ethics and Public Policy Center, holds that this progressive tendency has a generational origin when she says that the Catholic Church in the United States has always had a problem with generations. Catholic *baby boomers* grew up in a time of splendour and they believed the myth that the Church was in need of modernisation. Their problem is that none of them read the documents in Vatican

4 Julio Martínez Mesanza, *Exaltación del rito*, en *Europa*. Seville: Editorial Renacimiento, 1986.

5 Patricia Tevington y Gregory A. Smith, *47% of U.S. Adults Have a Personal or Family Connection to Catholicism*, Pew Research Center, 16 June 2025. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/06/16/47-of-us-adults-have-a-personal-or-family-connection-to-catholicism/>

6 *Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA)* is Georgetown University’s research centre for study of the Catholic Church in the United States. It recently published the report on *National Weekly Sunday Mass Attendance Reaches 24%*. Available at: <https://www.ncronline.org/news/us-sunday-mass-attendance-back-pre-pandemic-levels>

II Conciliation. In addition, Generation Z is curious to discover the reasons why they have grown up in an empty world. We should not be surprised to find that tradition is back and especially among those who grew up in a post Christian society. The North American clergy has also suffered in this context which explains their scrupulous care for the liturgy, their orthodox training and their love of tradition.

It is not so much that religion is fashionable in all environments or social groups. This trend current in modern societies has an uncomfortable name, but that fact does not make it any less true: religious orthodoxy is no longer a nostalgic step backwards but a prophetic response to the challenges of our times. Age old tradition has returned to the arena thanks to its ability to recover the best of the Christian legacy, lighting the way in the darkest hours for younger generations who are seeking meaning in life.

Again Benedict XVI provides the key: «The true meaning of tradition is that of dynamic commitment. That is, a commitment which, because it remains faithful to its origin, permits a legitimate continuity with the past»⁷. That authentic faith which has no time for fashions or trends, which challenges modernity with questions of its own, is what is emerging in America now and which aims to continue to provide answers in a world that we thought was secular.

7 Benedict XVI. Sermon to the Roman Curia 22 December 20056

3. United States: from Protestantism to burgeoning Catholicism

3.1. The historical predominance of Protestant churches

Despite any difficulty in forecasting religious trends for the next few years there is no question that it is clear that the United States is a protestant country. This is not merely what could be termed spiritual certainty but it is plainly a social and cultural truth. A Protestant genome flows through North American veins, pervading every aspect, including Catholicism itself. For this reason a brief glimpse of the country's religious history will enable us to pinpoint exactly where this renaissance of Christian orthodoxy has been incubating.

In the earliest colonial settlements it was the puritan, Congregationalist, Presbyterian and Anglican churches that organised not only spiritual life, but also moulded the social and political landscape, forging a new civilisation with a profoundly protestant ethos. With the First Great Awakening –the dominant religious movement in the colonies during the mid-18th century– a more personal and emotional form of faith gained credence, with preaching that appealed to the heart, an insistence on conversion as «being born again» and a renewed evangelical drive that questioned merely nominal religiosity⁸. This protestant dynamism –to give it a name of sorts– made a decisive contribution to setting up the subsequent religious terrain in the United States.

As a result, during the 19th and 20th centuries, the North American religious scenario became further diversified, thus Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Baptists, Episcopalians and other denominations played a central role in the social, political and educational life of the country⁹. These branches of Protestantism, many

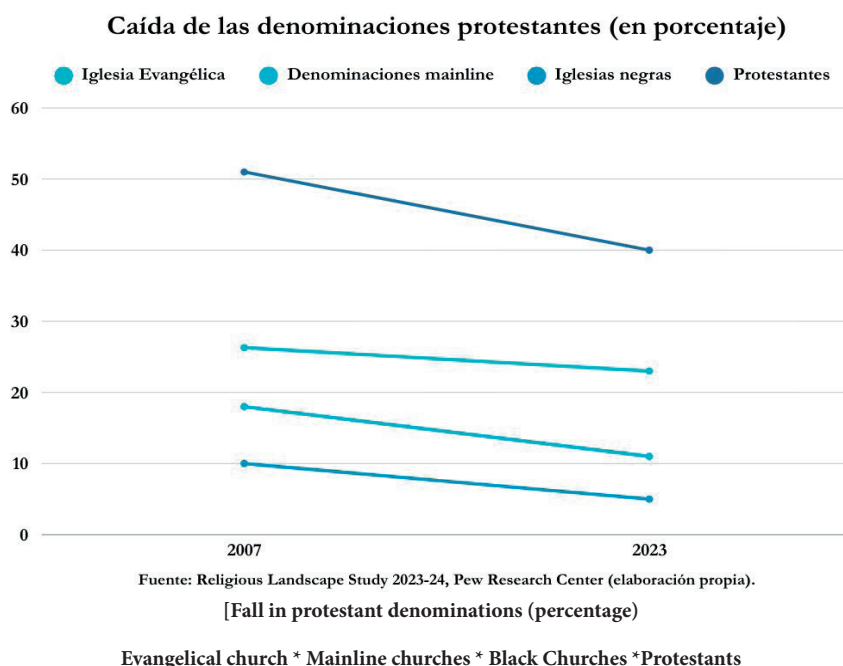
8 Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (Yale University Press, 2007). In his book Kidd presents a detailed study of the First Great Awakening in the 18th century North American colonies, showing how the earliest evangelical movements transformed the religious, social and political life of the country.

9 Many of the great US universities were founded by Protestant churches, a fact that reflects the influence of these churches: among others, both Harvard and Yale were founded by the Congregationalists (1636 and 1701 respectively), (1701), Princeton by the Presbyterians (1746), and Boston University by the Methodists (1839). These institutions still play a crucial role in the formation of North American leaders and in disseminating that Protestant moral ethos in US society.

of which were considered *mainline*¹⁰, dominated, not only in numbers but also in terms of their institutional and moral sway. In this regard it is significant to consider the enormous influence of Martin Luther King –a Baptist pastor–, or the most recent list of US presidents, the Presbyterian Ronald Reagan, the Episcopalian George H. W. Bush, the Baptist Bill Clinton, the Methodist George W. Bush, or the «non»¹¹ Barack Obama.

However, Catholicism was always there in the background. Although that supremacy still continues to be firmly entrenched, the most recent statistics show a notable change. According to the latest *Religious Landscape Study* published by the Pew Research Center (2023-24), the percentage of US adults who identify as Protestants has dropped from approximately 51% in 2007 to 40% at the present time¹². Something is shifting in the United States and it is not exactly an inexplicable phenomenon.

Some further figures highlight this shift in faith in North America. In recent years, all the main branches of Protestantism have suffered losses, for example, evangelical religions have dropped from 26.3% to 23.1% of the adult population between 2007 and 2023-24; the *mainline* protestants dropped from 18.1% to 11.5%; and the historically Black churches have also dropped from 6.9% to 5.4% in the same period¹³. Could it be that the USA has become a secular society?



Source:]

10 The mainline churches of US Protestantism are the historical churches which traditionally exercised a huge cultural, educational and political influence. These include Methodists (United Methodist Church), Presbyterians (PCUSA), Episcopalians, Lutherans (ELCA), Congregationalists and the United Church of Christ.

11 The term non-denominational –or non– is used quite naturally in the United States to refer to churches that are not affiliated to any particular denomination. This phenomenon is very extensive, especially among the evangelical churches.

12 Pew Research Center, *US Christian Decline May Be Stabilizing: 2023-24 Religious Landscape Study*, 26 February 2025.

13 Ibid.

There is more: a specific example of the more institutional type of protestants is provided by the United Methodist Church¹⁴: according to Pew, the percentage of US adults has dropped from 5.1% in 2007 to around 2.7% in 2023-24. This supports the idea that many of *mainline* churches –which for decades were heart and soul of US Protestantism– are losing demographic ground. And there are, let us say, doctrinal explanations for this: it is precisely the terribly modernist *United* branch of the Methodists that have fervently embraced LGTB policies, homosexual marriage and the ordination of LGTB ministers.

None of this would appear to have come about by chance. What the statistics show with numbers, David Azerrad summarises with sociological intuition. Not for nothing has this university professor at Hillsdale College been pointing out with some irony that «the gay flag is the most efficient detector of denominations set to disappear: within thirty years they will have no one because they have offered their members the same as what modernity offers them but missing its cultural force».

The result of all this is that the decline in numbers of protestant churches has become structural. According to the *General Social Survey*¹⁵, *mainline* denominations have gone from accounting for 30% of adults in the nineteen sixties to less than 10% today, resulting in a visible setback within its own community fabric¹⁶. Similarly, the Hartford Institute for Religion Research¹⁷ indicates that the average age of many congregations is over 55 years, and that more than half of churches have less than a hundred active members, which is a reflection of the complex generational continuity. And aside from young people's abandonment –only 44% of those who grew up in those churches continue to follow them, according to Pew¹⁸– there is also a growing internal fragmentation that has led to ruptures, including 6000 congregations of the United Methodist Church since 2019.

However it would not be fair to generalise. This decadent trend within Protestantism is principally confined to the mainline churches, which have eagerly embraced cultural assimilation of modernity. Conversely, the more traditional currents of Protestantism continue to be an important instrument for faith in the United States.

14 In 2022 there was a significant schism in the United Methodist Church when the most traditional churches -in disagreement with the policies on LGBT ordination and marriage- broke away to form the *Global Methodist Church*. Up to 2023, thousands of churches have abandoned the UMC. An interesting article in this regard is *United Methodists Lose 1,800 Churches in Split Over LGBT Stance*. Available at: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2023/01/umc-churches-leave-global-methodist-denomination-schism/>

15 The *General Social Survey* was compiled and published by the *National Opinion Research Center* of the University of Chicago. Available at: <https://gss.norc.umd.edu/get-the-data.html>

16 In this respect, studies compiled by the *Public Religion Research Institute* are also very interesting. Their annual reports on the *American Religious Landscape* demonstrate how the *mainline* churches are declining while non-denominational (*religiously unaffiliated*) churches prosper. Available at: <https://prri.org/spotlight/2024-prri-census-of-american-religion/>

17 According to *Faith Communities Today Overview* published by the *Hartford Institute for Religion Research* (2020), 65% of Protestant congregations have less than 100 members weekly and amount to a generalised ageing population. Available at: <https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Faith-Communities-Today-2020-Summary-Report.pdf>

18 According to the *Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Study*, «among all U.S. adults who were raised Protestant, 44% still identify with the same denominational family as they did as children, while 26% identify with a different one. An additional 22% are religiously unaffiliated, 2% identify as Catholic, and 4% identify with another religion». Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/religious-switching/>

They are united precisely because they have maintained a clear theology, with an orthodox doctrine, and committed communities. The *Religious Landscape Study* proves us right: evangelicals continue to make up 23% of Americans; a proportion which, although slightly less than 2007, remains constant¹⁹.

And this pattern of the most orthodox communities being those that are thriving extends to other forms of Christianity. The example of Mormonism –officially, the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints– represents another bastion of tradition which has resisted the challenge of modern times. According to Pew’s same survey, around 2% of North Americans identify as Mormons, a figure that has barely varied in recent years. Moreover, the Mormons not only retain a high level of community identity, but also some 48% claim to have become more religious throughout their lifetime²⁰. It could be said that Mormons are growing not in numbers but downwards –in intensity–.

To conclude, this historical review illustrates how Protestantism was for generations the spiritual foundation on which the culture and social identity of the United States was built. However, current figures reveal that this predominance is currently being redefined and the decline of these churches is not indiscriminate, for it is communities that have opted to reaffirm a clear identity that show the greatest vigour, while the past splendour of the modernising churches has fallen away.

Thus, it may be concluded that the conundrum of US religion is ever more varied. It is not so much that Protestant influence has disappeared, but that it no longer pervades all spheres of public life as it did for centuries. And it is in this more open and pluralist landscape that the growth –both numerical and spiritual– of Catholicism acquires special significance; it is no longer intervening in a «mono-protestant» country but in a religious society in transformation. More dynamic, more dissenting and as such, more receptive to listening to the message that is *age old and always new*.

3.2. Growth of the Catholic Church in recent years

The voice of experience has proved us right: it is often the case that history seems to progress in subtle waves rather than through open revolutions. To a considerable extent, this is what has occurred with Catholicism in the United States over the last few years. It is not a question of a sudden and strident rise –there has not been a demographic boom or an exponential growth of numbers of Catholics– but instead it is a complex process that has developed spiritual density rather than a simple quantitative increase. Behind all the figures there is a trend that can only be explained from the perspective of the supernatural: ecclesiastical movements

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ «Mormons (48%) are especially likely to say they have become more religious during their lifetimes». *Pew Research Center*. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/religious-switching/>

that are growing, liturgical practices that recover tradition, a renewed public presence of faith, vocations for religious life and the priesthood, and a youth that has rediscovered the beauty of orthodoxy. Together these factors, among many others, have made US Catholicism an increasingly present and vital voice in contemporary public life.

From all this it is possible to draw an initial conclusion: the Catholic growth that is touching US society is not measured by maximum numbers but rather by the depth and density of the faith. This entrenchment is motivated by movements, institutions and means that have been working with wisdom and dedication for decades. Although the landscape is extensive, rich and varied, a typical example can be found in the Fellowship of Catholic University Students (known throughout the country as FOCUS), which has concentrated its admirable work in universities. It was their campus teams («missionaries») who managed to evangelise hundreds of faculties and *colleges*, accompanying students in small groups providing spiritual education and guidance. The FOCUS annual reports document their successes in numbers of those evangelised on campus and the growth of student communities that share their catholic faith with complete naturalness²¹.

Together with these results, other movements and initiatives promoted by the Catholic church have gained traction, the *Knights of Columbus*, an historic lay order founded in 1882, has in recent years registered a significant increase in the number of affiliations (over 2.1 million members and almost 100,000 new affiliates in 2024²²), and their role in the pro-life movement, social work and public visibility has been notable. This combination of numerical growth, economic capacity and public presence has made the *Knights* one of the organisational pillars of the Catholic resurgence in the United States.

However, Catholicism is not merely alive within these movements but also in the public arena. For this reason the communications media are even more important. The growth of the Church in recent years is due largely to cultural and social evangelism and through new forms of communication, namely the examples of the *EWTN* or *Word on Fire*, an initiative of the bishop Robert Barron, which has put new Catholic content at the forefront in the North American public arena. With its accessible theology, audio-visual good looks and modern technological resources, these initiatives have attracted young audiences and families who have been seeking intellectual solidity and liturgical depth for some time. The audience figures for Monsignor Barron corroborate this growth: *Word on Fire* emails daily reflections to over 500,000 subscribers, with over 4.8 million followers on social networks, and its Institute has over 24,000 missionaries in over 90 countries²³. This is clearly an indisputably viral phenomenon.

21 A note on its website contains these figures. Available at: <https://focus.org/about/news-press-room/recent-press-releases/focus-missionaries-courageously-share-faith-and-inspire-hope-around-the-world/>

22 As the Knights indicated at their annual Convention. Available at: <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/supreme-knight-patrick-kelly-encourages-knights-of-columbus-to-remain-on-mission-at-142nd-supreme-convention-302218203.html>

23 Available at: <https://www.wordonfire.org/impact/#impact>

However, yet again the presence of these figures does not necessarily indicate that «all things Catholic» are in fashion. Or not just this. A positively explosive event for the Church in this revival –which puts a name to this Catholic trend– was the National Eucharistic Revival, an initiative launched by the American bishops in 2022 and further upheld at the National Eucharistic Congress held in Indianapolis in 2024. In this return to tradition, the bishops have worked in recent years on creating a Eucharistic teaching with a national scope, with pilgrimages, diocesan congresses, adoration campaigns and countless acts that are helping to revive the significance of the sacraments in thousands of parishes and pastoral centres. It was no accident that the congress of 2024 and its accompanying multitudinous pilgrimage was massively covered in the press and led to a turning point in that the Eucharist was no longer considered a merely liturgical matter but came to occupy the centre of public and educational life in many dioceses, indicating the renewed strength of tradition. All of which has led to further hours of adoration, more processions, greater numbers of confessions and sustained growth of Eucharistic teaching initiatives²⁴.

Nevertheless, this «we are so back» has not only gained strength within the parishes through the bishops' initiative, but it has also spread outwards from the churches. The Catholic reaction to these cultural transformations was equally far-reaching. This paradigm can be found in the *Roe vs. Wade case* (1973) and its revocation in 2022 (*Dobbs vs. Jackson*), which in one way has functioned as a beacon that illuminates Catholic commitment in the public sphere. Since the nineteen seventies, Roe provided the catalyst for the creation and expansion of pro-life movements; many Catholic organisations at the time linked the defence of life with public action. Decades later, the Dobbs ruling has revived political and pastoral mobilisation with a greater presence of Catholics in pro-life marches, legislative initiatives and civic activism, as it has led to a decisive moment in public opinion on some aspects of abortion. In sociological terms, this legal milestone has served as a political and cultural stimulus, driving many Catholics to once again articulate their faith in public conversation²⁵.

This was not always the case, because for a long time, as the academic David S. Crawford dean of the John Paul II Pontifical Institute recalls, «the history of Catholicism in America is one of constant acceptance by non-Catholics. It has always been necessary to ask permission. Even John F Kennedy found himself battling that anti-Catholic sentiment because many thought that he was controlled by the Pope. Kennedy even ended up stating “I am not the Catholic candidate for president. I am the Democratic Party’s candidate for president who also happens to be a Catholic”. This privatisation of the faith no longer has any meaning».

24 The *National Eucharistic Congress* of Indianapolis gathered over 50,000 faithful according to the *Catholic News Agency*. The pilgrimage organised by the bishops garnered even greater attendance according to the organisers with up to 250,000 participants. Available at: <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/258293/national-eucharistic-congress-to-draw-more-than-50000-to-indianapolis>; y en: <https://www.osvnews.com/for-3-year-national-eucharistic-revival-the-end-is-the-beginning/>

25 The Conference of Catholic Bishops of the United States (USCCB) recognised that the judgment «cleared the way». In a recent note the pro-life Committee's president Monsignor Daniel E. Thomas held that «the Dobbs decision not only gave states the freedom to protect preborn children but also paved the way for pro-life victories nationally». Available at: <https://www.usccb.org/resources/2025-Dobbs-Anniversary-Statement-Final%20Formatted%206-9-25.pdf>

An example of how this faith is experienced so naturally easily comes to mind. The tributes and ceremonies following the recent assassination of Charlie Kirk have served to remind us of the public visibility of faith. Hearing the Vice President of the United States, as one of many, reciting a prayer in a news bulletin is an illustration of the phenomenon of unapologetic openness that has intensified in recent years²⁶. From judges to academics, and from senators to journalists, North America is experiencing a growing public presence of Catholics in positions of power. And although this is not the only reason for the current strength and vigour of Catholicism, it nevertheless demonstrates the fact that Catholic voices are being heard more clearly in some spheres.

Finally, it is worth pausing a moment to consider the cultural context in this regard. In a scenario marked by institutional weariness and uncertainty, the Catholic tradition has shown that it can function as a stable counterweight. For many young people, the appropriately celebrated liturgy, the anthropological view of tradition and participation in established communities is not simply a nostalgic step backwards, but instead a way of living meaningfully in the present. Once more, Professor David S. Crawford summarises this in an enlightening image: «One of the most interesting aspects of this return to tradition is the family dimension. Every time I visit Europe I see the grey-haired faithful at Mass while in the US parishes I see a congregation with many children, dreamy adolescents, cries and noise, large families and dozens of altar boys».

The result is a recalibration of US Catholicism, namely, the data at hand shows a modest yet continuous recovery of Sunday worship, the growth of lay movements, a dynamism in university evangelisation and clear signs of vocational life in specific dioceses –which confirm that in the United States it is not so much that numbers are increasing but something much more profound, in the form of a solid foundation that is looking inwards while continuing to bear fruit outwardly.

3.3. A growth that can be explained by tradition

The conclusion sounds familiar, in that *the procession goes inside*. This internal consolidation of Catholicism in the United States is the driving force that explains this outward resurgence where tradition has become a source of growth in modern life. This is clearly not a nostalgic orthodoxy but rather a living tradition which has led to practices, institutions and communities capable of sustaining a faith without fuss or fanfare in turbulent times.

This is why the context is important. In recent decades, religious identity in the United States has changed in that, although the proportion of adults who identify as Christians has diminished over the years, the number of Catholics has remained stable and continues to grow over that 20% of the adult population²⁷. These sta-

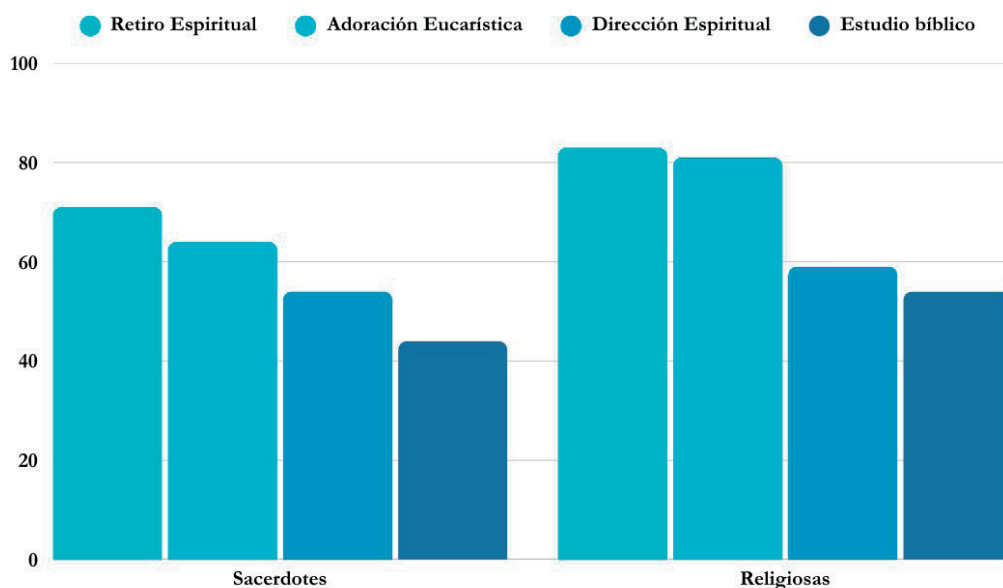
26 The *Faith on the Hill*, report published by Pew Research Center in January 2025, situates the figure of congressional members in the current legislature who declared themselves as Christians 87%. Further information at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/01/02/faith-on-the-hill-2025/>

27 *Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Eucharist Beliefs: A National Survey of Adult Catholics*, 2022. Available at: <https://caracatholic.substack.com/p/copy-eucharist-beliefs-a-national>

tistics present an interesting contrast: although Catholicism has not exactly experienced a huge percentage increase it has witnessed qualitative changes, such as more organised religious worship and a renewed public visibility. It is easy to explain this sustained vigour if we bear in mind that although the number of baptisms has not risen to any significant degree, the other sacraments have, and in the United States churchgoers are recovering the value of the Eucharist, confession and participation in parish life. It could be said that growth has not been upwards but rather downwards.

This deepening spirituality has found a fertile soil in liturgical and sacramental life. It is exactly for this reason if we look at specific worship, there is one fact that adequately reflects the intensity of that fervour which had seemed extinguished, namely, the attendance at Sunday mass which, according to CARA²⁸ is approximately 24% and many US parishes have shown this increase in its Sunday worshippers. Although this is not exactly an overwhelming figure in absolute terms, it does indicate that this adherence to the faith is not homogeneously distributed but is concentrated in communities that have prioritised liturgy and education. Faith is growing in those communities that are distinguished by their more reverential services, a serious catechumenate, a dedicated vocational pastoral care and promotion of the sacraments such as confession and adoration of the Eucharist²⁹.

Prácticas de fe en la Profesión Religiosa de 2024 (en porcentaje)



Fuente: The Profession Class of 2024, Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (elaboración propia).

[Religious practices in 2024 (percentages)]

Spiritual retreat * Eucharistic Adoration * Spiritual Guidance * Bible Study Priests Members of Religious Orders

Source:]

28 Ibid.

29 Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, A Report to the Secretariat of Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2025. Available at: <https://www.usccb.org/resources/Report-Profession%20Class%202024%20FINAL.pdf>

Father Thomas Gaunt, executive director of CARA, explains these figures thus: «Of those who consider themselves Catholics, we have carried out an in-depth study of their religious life. There are always 30-40% of the faithful who never go to church and there are also around 20-25% who perhaps go two or three times a year, coinciding with Christmas, Easter or Ash Wednesday, or for a funeral or wedding. This leaves 45% of Catholics who go to Mass at least once a month. We have traced our base line of religiousness on this monthly attendance in our research, and it all points to this trend, that within this 45% a growing 22-24% of Catholics attend Mass every week».

Added to this grounding of religious worship is an equally or even more decisive recovery of the intelligent nature of the faith, a determined effort at intellectual education. Institutions such as the John Paul II Institute for Marriage and Family³⁰, the Ethics and Public Policy Center³¹ or the Thomistic Institute³² have generated an academic corpus in which defence of natural law, the legacy of Christian anthropology and the huge task of participating in public life are intermingled. Prominent in this terrain, are brilliant thinkers such as David S. Crawford, Jay W. Richards or George Weigel who have provided detailed diagnoses of the contemporary anthropological crisis and the need for a rationally solid response. And these ideas are not exactly confined to the classroom, the return to traditional thinking is prevalent in seminaries, influencing bishops and young priests, inspiring catechists and circulating in podcasts, conferences and publications such as *First Things*³³. The result is an ecosystem which does not just think about orthodoxy, but which actually lives and experiences it and intellectual solvency remains incontrovertibly associated with the attraction that Catholicism has regained among the young.

The dynamic nature of a reasoned and attested faith is concentrated specifically in the pastoral domain where some specific dioceses are reflecting the vitality of tradition. Lincoln (Nebraska), Bismarck (North Dakota), Wichita (Kansas) and Denver (Colorado), to name just a few of many other dioceses, have for several years been recording vocational figures which are a great deal higher than the national average. According to CARA, whereas the US average is situated at around 1-2 ordinations per diocese per annum, these dioceses have maintained a level of 6, 8 or even 10 ordinations annually³⁴. In the same way, parishes that are concerned

30 Pontifical Institute associated with the *Catholic University of America*, in Washington D. C., concerned with the study of marriage and the family from the perspective of Catholic tradition and the Magesterium of Saint John Paul II. More information at: <https://www.johnpaulii.edu/about/our-mission/>

31 Among the US *think tanks* the *Ethics & Public Policy Center* (EPPC) stands out as one of the most influential bodies in public dialogue regarding ethics, theology, natural law and public policy, addressing these themes from the perspective of Christian anthropology. More information at: <https://eppc.org/publication/annualreport/>

32 The *Thomistic Institute* has promoted the study of the philosophy and theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas and his dialogue with contemporary thought. It has become an academic benchmark for Catholic thought in the intellectual education of priests, lay people and university students committed to tradition. Further information at: <https://thomisticinstitute.org/>

33 Founded in 1990 by Richard John Neuhaus this publication has gained influence in the United States due to its defence of theological, moral and cultural tradition. Under the guidance of its editor Rusty Reno who is both brilliant as he is polemical, the journal takes an active part in academic and public debates on Christian identity, tradition and politics, providing a conservative erudite voice within contemporary Catholicism.

34 One of the annual research surveys that the CARA closely follows is the *Survey of Ordinands to the Priesthood*. In the 2024 edition, the research centre painstakingly compiles specific statistics on the origin of new priests, their education, their call to vocation, military past, family conditions, parish and diocesan guidance, vocational programmes etc. Available at: <https://www.usccb.org/resources/Ordination%20Class%20of%202024%20-%20report.pdf>

with the liturgy and education have multiplied Eucharistic Adoration, pilgrimages and bible study groups³⁵, especially in dioceses led by bishops who encourage this legacy of tradition. Again, statistics show a continuous pattern of where Catholic identity is experienced with doctrinal clarity and liturgical beauty vocations and participation tend to grow.

On 11 November 2025, this surge of orthodoxy found an exemplary model. In a revealing movement, US bishops chose a new president of the USCCB, Monsignor Paul S. Coakley, archbishop of Oklahoma, and elected Daniel E. Flores, bishop of Brownsville, as vice president, The recently appointed Coakley who is a traditional prelate, has gained some standing among North American bishops for his strong defence of the faith, the family and doctrine regarding gender ideology³⁶. Flores, in turn, is a Doctor of Theology and comes from a mainly Hispanic diocese. Apart from the allocation of this natural role at the head of the USCBB, the recent vote was an institutional sign that the Catholic Church in the United States continues its endeavour to strengthen a commitment to an active and revitalising tradition.

In this way, in recent years, tradition has gone from being a marginal and obsolete remnant of the past to providing the impetus for discovering identity, a sense of belonging and purpose. Catholicism in North America is once again able to attract those who are seeking a faith that they can experience both deeply and consistently. Consequently, it could be said that there is growth arising *from tradition*, namely, a Church that is rising not through statistical expansion but because it has returned to its roots, and from this position it has rebuilt communities, vocations and a reinforced public presence.

In conclusion, rising up from its base, Catholicism is growing, not *against* but rather *in favour of* modernity; and this rebirth of Catholic tradition offers a framework of innovative significance adequately equipped to provide a response in our fractured times: in contrast to religious dissolution, it has stable communities within a shifting environment; in the absence of symbols it provides ritual practices that give time and life a sense of order; instead of credulity regarding the irrational, it offers intellectual faith capable of unabashed dialogue with contemporary culture.

3.4. Some additional considerations

This snapshot of the religious scenario in America would be incomplete if we failed to address three factors which, despite their differences, converge in this resurgence of US Catholicism, namely, the growing importance of Hispanic immigration, the increasingly visible presence of Catholics in positions of power and the

35 These bible study groups have become a viral phenomenon throughout the country. Aside from an active participation in parish life, young professional Americans have shown particular interest in experiencing their faith through small bible study groups. According to data in *Lifeway Research*, approximately 44% of Christians belong to such groups. <https://research.lifeway.com/2025/01/14/the-state-of-groups-trends-and-best-practices-for-groups-ministry/>

36 In this regard, Monsignor Coakley has also been one of the most courageous bishops, raising his voice against the immigrant deportation policies announced by the Trump administration. Further information at: <https://www.ncregister.com/cna/usccb-president-archbishop-coakley-election>

horizons that have opened up with the election of Pope Leo XIV, the first North American pope in history. These dynamics not only accompany this renaissance but they go some way to explaining it, because each one is instrumental in the force that is guiding Catholicism to a more clearly defined identity, which is decidedly familiar and doctrinally pure.

The first factor is demographic. For many years Hispano-American immigration has become the true strength of Catholicism in the United States. The figures speak for themselves as, according to Pew Research, 36% of Catholics are of Hispanic origin compared to twenty years ago when the proportion scarcely exceeded 29%³⁷. CARA calculates that if this trend continues, by 2035 more than half of all Catholics born in the US could be Hispanic³⁸. This will have a considerable pastoral and cultural impact. Thanks to immigration, those areas that were experiencing a rapid decline –especially in the south and in the country’s principal marginal neighbourhoods– are currently experiencing an unexpected revival. Houston, Dallas, Phoenix and Atlanta, among other cities have become testing grounds for a Catholicism marked by the presence of young families, rising rates of sacramental life and a more stable religiosity than that of the national average³⁹.

This strengthening of the faith is not solely a question of numbers, however it also introduces elements that align surprisingly well with the US return to tradition, namely, community religiousness, a natural appreciation for the sacraments, deeply rooted Marian devotion, a sense of belonging and a particularly strong link between faith, family and daily life. According to CARA, more Hispanic Catholics regularly attend Mass than non-Hispanics, and they continue to maintain much higher rates in terms of confessions and weddings⁴⁰. In a society where religious individualism has wrought havoc, this way of experiencing and practising the faith acts as a reminder that tradition is not an anachronism but a living culture that sustains communities⁴¹.

37 A recent report by Pew Research. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/06/16/profile-of-hispanic-catholics-in-the-us/>

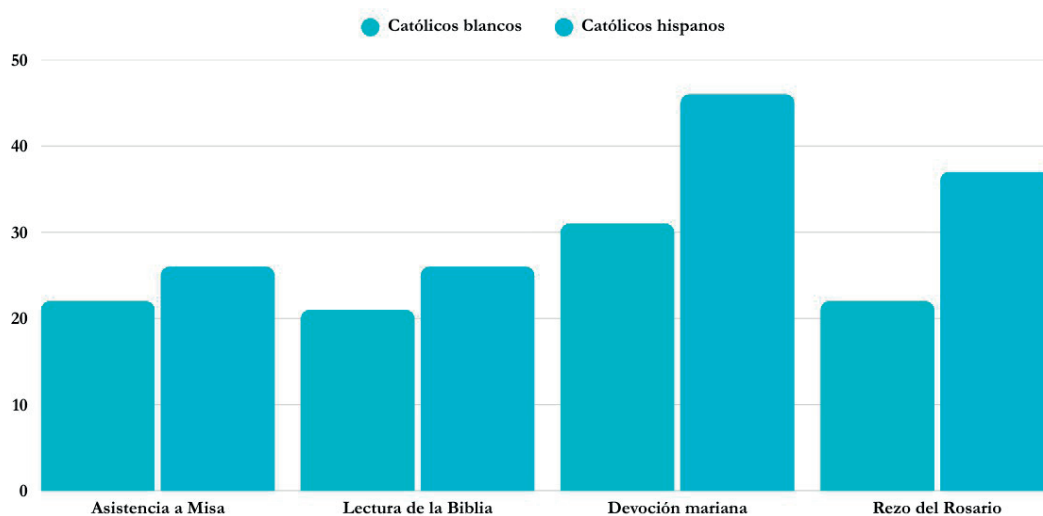
38 An analysis by the Catholic Review explains this trend: «The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, CARA, estimated that in 2022 there were 73.5 million Catholics in the country. That places the 31 million Hispanics just mentioned at about 42 percent of the entire U.S. Catholic population. The more conservative estimate from the Official Catholic Directory suggests a U.S. Catholic population of 66.5 million for the same year, bringing Hispanics to about 47 percent of the total U.S. Available at: <https://catholicreview.org/analysis-is-the-u-s-churchs-hispanic-catholic-hope-slipping-away/>

39 Further information at: <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/religion/article/hispanic-catholics-texas-17875633.php>

40 Further information at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/06/16/profile-of-hispanic-catholics-in-the-us/>

41 According to *Ordination Class* of 2023, compiled by CARA, 16% of priests ordained that year were Hispanic. This percentage continues to grow throughout all the US dioceses. Further information at: <https://www.usccb.org/resources/ordination%20class%202023%20final%20report.pdf>

Comparativa de religiosidad entre católicos blancos y católicos hispanos (en porcentaje)



Fuente: Profile of Hispanic Catholics in the U.S., Pew Research Center (elaboración propia).

[Comparison of religiousness of non-Hispanic and Hispanic Catholics (percentage)]

Non-Hispanic Catholics * Hispanic Catholics Mass attendance * Bible reading * Marian devotion * Saying the Rosary

Source:]

The second factor is institutional. Over the last twenty years, the presence of Catholics in the United States' political and administrative life has quietly but consistently risen. This is not a marginal phenomenon, as the Pew Research Centre estimates that the presence of Catholics among federal employees and senior public officials is much greater than their percentage in the general population. Moreover, this Catholic visibility is gaining increasing support: According to Pew, 59% of North Americans view the influence of public life in the US as positive compared to the 49% registered just three years ago⁴².

This fact is echoed to some extent in the composition of the country's legal elites, as in recent years the majority of the Supreme Court's nine judges have been practising Catholics- six of the nine current judges have stated that they are Catholics⁴³. And their judgments have to some extent illustrated this wave of religiousness, in that a 2022 study showed that 35% of Americans believe that a Supreme Court should be aligned with religious principles, and for 51%, the justice body should be simply «neutral», whereas just 11% believe that the court is hostile to the various religious denominations⁴⁴.

The electoral campaign also reflects this shift. The potential *presidential ticket* to succeed Donald Trump, formed by J. D. Vance and Marco Rubio –as all the polls predict–, presents an anomaly in that both are

42 *Growing Share of U.S. Adults Say Religion Is Gaining Influence in American Life*, Pew Research Center. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/10/20/growing-share-of-us-adults-say-religion-is-gaining-influence-in-american-life/>

43 Further information at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/09/30/politics/supreme-court-catholicism-rulings-barrett-kennedy>

44 *Religion and the Supreme Court*, Pew Research Center. available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/10/27/religion-and-the-supreme-court/>

practising Catholics. This revelation that Catholic identity is no longer an obstacle to public office but in fact a recognisable cultural reference and even an electoral preference comes as no surprise. With the discourse centred on re-establishing the family and recovering Vance's small communities, along with Rubio's biography of deep religious conviction, the possible future administration will embody that synthesis so pertinent to US Catholicism, which falls between moral tradition, public vocation and a certain life of domestic faith. What some years ago would have seemed improbable- an irrefutably Catholic presidential formula –today it emerges simply as the most likely option.

The third and most recent element adds a symbolic and spiritual dimension, in the election of Leon XIV as the first United States Pope. Following a century of European popes and the extended Hispano American cycle of Pope Francis, a pope from the global north raises new questions: How will the United States Church be influenced by the fact of having a pope who was shaped in the same cultural context? And how will this impact the communities that have rediscovered liturgical tradition, doctrinal clarity and the moral teaching of theology? Although the response is not immediate, we can conclude that for traditional US Catholicism, the election of Pope Leo is not so much a coronation as a responsibility. The distance between the United States and Rome has dissipated.

In short, these three final considerations show that US Catholicism is growing, not because it has become diminished or more superficial in any way, but rather because it is becoming more deeply entrenched. Hispanic immigration has brought with it family life and popular devotion; the institutional presence has returned a moral language to public discourse that hitherto had seemed abandoned; and the election of Pope Leo has projected onto the church something that is already palpable in many US dioceses namely, a tradition that is once more rich and deep, a faith that is unashamedly lived and experienced, and a community which, rather than expanding in numbers has learned to dig deep into its foundations.

4. Conclusions

The pages, figures and analysis in this report have enabled us to confirm something that for years had remained concealed behind superficial readings, namely, that in the United States faith is not evaporating but restructuring. Where other denominations have watered down their theological identity, there has been a sharp decline; where tradition has stood firm, energy and vigour have endured. The data clearly depict this trend, in that mainline Protestantism which for centuries provided the backbone of US cultural identity has been shrinking continuously for over half a century, while communities with a solid doctrine- basically evangelical, Pentecostal and Mormons- have resisted the challenges of time with a stability that has nothing to do with chance.

However, Catholicism has followed a different path, although in terms of figures, the results are not striking it has nevertheless experienced a process of internal consolidation. Although the percentages still remain modest, they actually conceal some profound transformations. Dioceses are multiplying their vocations well above the average, there are parishes where the liturgy has been meticulously respected, and university movements have renewed the evangelism of young people, and there has been a Eucharistic renaissance that has returned to the US Church the sacramental significance on which its whole mission depends. This is not a case of reshaping in merely emotional terms but rather a gradual revival that is strengthening the life of Catholicism from within.

As has been shown throughout the report, this dynamism has been reinforced by cultural and demographic factors. Hispanic immigration has introduced a way of experiencing faith –familiar, community and devotional– which surprisingly aligns with the US return to tradition. Thus, this should not be seen as a merely quantitative contribution because as a result of this phenomenon the Church has regained its natural sense of belonging which had been eroded by decades of religious individualism. And at the same time, the growing presence of Catholics in the public sphere –from the Supreme Court to the federal administration– has once again placed a recognisable language at the forefront of public conversation, able to put forward extremely old ideas that still seem new. Clearly, this is the force of tradition.

To conclude, the scenario for faith in North America is a hopeful one. As we have seen, this religious resurgence is not the result of a communicative strategy or liturgical nostalgia, nor is it even a political reaction, in fact, it is the result of a growing number of specific communities who have rediscovered the Christian way of life amid the uncertainty of the modern era. In times marked by inconsistency, tradition has once again provided a route map, giving us guidance in our lives. Again, this is tradition, not as entrenchment but as opportunity. Not as resistance to the world, but as a way of inhabiting it with meaning.

And this is the final lesson of this report. In a country that seemed destined to embody textbook secularity –in the United States all the requisite components are present–, faith has found unexpected ways to remain worthwhile, creating an ambitious public conversation and offering a real alternative to the predominant train of thought. Tradition has not returned as a political order but as a deeply rooted phenomenon. In short, if something is clear in the North American experience, it is that in the Church –just as in our lives– only those able to grow downwards are finally able to grow upwards to the Highest.

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