



## Religious Institutions Remain Irreplaceable Good Samaritans

**P**ope Francis brought to the Vatican—much like his predecessors, especially Pope John Paul II—a deep conviction of the need for the Catholic Church to bring Jesus’s mission of redemption to the world. He sees his role as that of a Christian evangelist to the whole world. As a Jesuit training seminarians in Argentina, he came to believe that priests need to be integrated into the social life of their communities. He rejected liberation theology promoted by the Jesuit hierarchy in Argentina.

In his evangelical commitment, he revealed a willingness to make compromises with authoritarian regimes, as was the case with the Argentina military regime when he was a cardinal and later with the Chinese communist government as Pope. For his compromises he has been rightfully criticized by many.

His belief in spreading the Church’s evangelical mission, the Good News brought by Christ’s message, however, should not be questioned. He understands that Christian faith and practice have fallen precipitously in the West. Pope Francis knows that religious faith is necessary for individual salvation and essential for healthy communities.

Equally important, faith-based charities are needed to care for the poor, the hungry, the ill and the marginal—those unable for whatever reason to cope with the safety nets created by the huge, bureaucratic modern welfare states found in Western Europe and the United States. Without faith-based charities providing shelters, soup kitchens, food delivery, drug and mental health centers, and an array of other services, millions of people would fall through the cracks of the welfare state. The essential role of faith-based charities in U.S. communities is confirmed by a new Arizona State University study.

Before examining this new report, we will turn to the latest development in Pope Francis’s effort to revive the Church in an age of secularizing.

Faced with Western secularization, Pope Francis has sought to revive and expand the Church spiritually and institutionally by encouraging greater lay involvement on the parish and diocese levels. With this goal in mind, Pope Francis called for a Bishops’ Synod on Synodality. Breaking with synod tradition, he invited lay to join bishops in Rome for a preliminary synod held October 4-29, 2023 and a final synod held October 2-27, 2024. Francis instructed the participants to engage with each other through small groups focused on specific issues.

### A Luckily Anticlimactic Synod

**T**he first synod produced a “working document”—“How to Be a Missionary Synodal Church”—which asked the 400 participants in the synod to discuss concrete ways to enhance and institutionalize lay involvement throughout the international church. Included in the preliminary document were proposals for lay pastoral councils, finance councils and various other organs of accountability. While the document affirmed the principle of unity and the bishop as final decisionmaker, it encouraged discussion on the ordination of female priests, LGBT relations and other controversial issues.<sup>1</sup> Women and other lay activists played an important role in pushing these issues to the forefront in the first synod.

As recounted in the February and March 2024 *Mindszenty Reports*, the first synod drew subdued criticism from prominent theologians. At the follow-up second synod this fall, opposition to activist proposals to transform the Church prevented a final report from taking firm stances on hot-button issues. Instead, the final document called for further discussion on certain issues. As a result, the press did not find much news to report about the second synod.<sup>2</sup>

It was significant, however, that *any movement to ordain women priests was clearly set aside and has been dropped for the time being. Other proposals such as the call for female deacons were left for further discussion.*<sup>3</sup>

Also important and missed by much of the press was the *lack of traction for a proposal to impart doctrinal authority to episcopal conferences*. This, too, was left for further discussion. Such a proposal, if implemented, meant that the Universal Church would be replaced with a fragmented episcopal church. The majority of the synod, it appears, pushed back on the proposal. Without a mandate from the bishops, *any significant changes in Church doctrine remain highly unlikely*.

## Facing Secularization

Whatever Pope Francis decides, the Catholic Church in Eastern and Western Europe and in the Western hemisphere faces declining numbers of those attending church and declaring themselves Roman Catholic. Catholics are not the only church in decline. Christianity itself is in decline in the West.

We have known for quite a while about the growing secularization and decrease in religious faith and participation in religious services. Recent surveys, however, show that this decline has accelerated.

We need not go into the details of these surveys, but some general figures are warranted in order to understand the depth of the crisis. A Pew Research study in 2020 found that only 64 percent of Americans including children were Christian. Thirty percent identified as “nones.” Another 6 percent belonged to other religions. Based on calculations of the young identifying as “nones,” and if current trends continue, by 2070 the majority of the population will be “nones.”

Even with different demographic scenarios—population growth through immigration or a continuing decline in the rate of U.S. population growth—Christians will no longer be a majority of the population. Those identifying as “nones” will become either the plurality or the majority of the population.<sup>4</sup> The decline of religiosity is found in all Protestant denominations, evangelical and mainstream, as well as the Catholic Church.

This decline in religiosity in America is confirmed in more recent surveys.<sup>5</sup> The percentage of adults attending religious services remains low. A little over a fifth say they attend services weekly. Nearly a third say that they never attend. Of the denominations, Mormons (Latter-day Saints) attend most regularly (two thirds), while only a third of those identifying as Catholic attend weekly or almost weekly. *Catholics have shown the largest drop in regular*

*attendance since 2000, falling from 45 percent to 33 percent.*

In this regard, the United States is catching up with secular Western Europe. For decades after World War II, American culture bucked the secularization trend of Western Europe. Beginning in the 1980s, and accelerating in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, religious faith in the United States has been dropping.

*For the first time ever in any age cohort, women from Gen Z (born 1998-2012) are more likely to be religiously unaffiliated than men.* According to a 2023 survey by the American Enterprise Institute Survey Center on American Life, 39 percent of Gen Z women are unaffiliated while 34 percent of men are unaffiliated.<sup>6</sup>

Young men and young women today seem to be on totally different life trajectories. Childless young men are likelier than childless young women to say they want to become parents someday, by a margin of 12 percentage points, according to a 2023 Pew survey. Incredibly, nearly 3 in 10 Gen Z women identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community. Young men voted for Donald Trump as the 47<sup>th</sup> U.S. president in far greater numbers than young women.

## Faith-Based Entities Still Matter

There has been some return to the pews since the Covid-19 pandemic, but the long-term trend toward secularization in America is undeniable. This secularization trend comes at a time when religious charities are playing an ever more important role in our communities.

The importance of faith-based organizations is confirmed in a recent report by Arizona State University’s Center of American Institutions, *A Thousand Points of Light Still Shine: Religion, Charity, and American Life* (2024). This report was issued by a national commission composed of Leo Raymond Cardinal Burke, Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr. and Rabbi Pinchus Allouche, nationally prominent leaders in the Roman Catholic, Southern Baptist and Jewish faiths. The report finds that *faith-based organizations reach beyond the spiritual needs of their congregations and provide for the immediate physical needs of their neighbors*.

They collect and distribute food. They help with rent and utilities and point people to additional organizations that can assist. They support and operate ambitious programs addressing complex problems, such as addiction, literacy,

homelessness, employment assistance, neighborhood cleanup and at-risk youth.

The new report discusses the extent that faith-based organizations are involved in maintaining the health of our communities. As Rabbi Allouche observes in the report, “Faith-based organizations are the lifeblood of America’s moral fabric, calling each of us to fulfill our God-given responsibility to heal the world.”<sup>7</sup>

This national report rests on solid empirical research, beginning with a survey of individual religious congregations in four cities: Detroit, Michigan; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Miami, Florida; and Phoenix, Arizona. These four cities are regionally representative. Approximately 260 clergy were directly contacted, and another 1,310 congregations were invited to complete an anonymous survey on the activities that their faith-based organizations engage in regularly.

Denominations surveyed included African Methodist Episcopal Church, Assembly of God, Baptist, Catholic (Roman and Eastern), Disciples of Christ, Episcopalian, General Evangelical, Independent, Jewish, Mormon, Lutheran, Messianic Church, Methodist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Quaker and Seventh Day Adventist. Muslims were surveyed, but because of the lack of responses they were not included in final analysis.

### Meeting Real Needs

**W**hat researchers found is that most food pantries and organizations distributing food boxes in these communities are faith-based. In fact, *if you are among the hungry, desperate to keep your family or yourself from starving, you most likely rely on religious organizations to feed you.* For example, 86 percent of food pantries in Detroit found on the online resource findhelp.org are faith-based.<sup>8</sup>

Not only do faith-based charities feed people; four of the seven “best” drug addiction treatment facilities in Detroit are faith-based, according to Addiction Resource.<sup>9</sup> A family in danger of becoming homeless in Philadelphia can turn to faith-based groups to help with back rent and utilities. Nearly half of the programs listed on the findhelp.org database that welcome the most vulnerable homeless people—minors, migrants and those with mental health and addiction issues—are faith-based.

Faith-based groups are also a vital part of the network of public and private *organizations that homeless people or*

*those in danger of losing their housing turn to for help.* Congregations provide direct aid, but also connect people facing bills they cannot pay with other organizations that can relieve the burden of missed rent or mortgage payments or overdue utility bills.

### More Effective Than Bureaucrats

**R**eligiously based philanthropic groups make grants available to targeted populations—such as veterans or people struggling with certain cancers or HIV—in order to keep them in their homes. Furthermore, religious charities actively partner with utility companies and landlords in providing relief. The report shows that the real safety net for the poor remains within faith-based charities, not the bureaucratic welfare state.

Health care is not the first thing that might come to mind in imagining the social services that congregations offer. Yet many faith-based organizations and congregations are involved in providing health care programming or *mental health and drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs.* While most congregations are not set up to offer direct counseling or treatment, they often provide space for Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and other recovery groups. For some churches this is a daily activity. One congregation in Phoenix opens space to an NA group that meets daily, an AA group that meets three days each week, and a Crystal Meth Anonymous group that holds weekly meetings.

A focus on children and young adults comes naturally to religious congregations. Faith-based organizations operate *summer camps, after-school clubs and activities, and mentoring programs for children.* These programs fill important needs for safe and enriching places where children can play and learn. Congregations and larger religious institutions provide health care services for women, as well as *counseling for unwed and single mothers.* Some churches have ministries aimed at combatting human trafficking and helping its victims recover.

Large faith-based nonprofit foundations play a *critical role in foster care and child adoption services.* These children are usually the victims of abuse or neglect. While the goal is to reunite these children with responsible family members, foster families replace orphanages as the stopgap until that might happen. Cities or states contract with faith-based organizations to connect children with families willing to take often troubled children into their homes.

In each of the cities surveyed in the report, faith groups engaged with the foster care system. Their involvement, even though longstanding, has become controversial. For example, in 2018, the city of Philadelphia determined that allegedly anti-LGBT policies made Catholic Social Services (CSS) an unfit partner. CSS charged that the city had violated its religious freedom and won in a 2021 narrowly focused U.S. Supreme Court decision.

## Occasional Blowback

**A**s religious liberty has come under attack, hate crimes are on the rise, especially against Jews and Catholics. In the wake of the 2022 *Dobbs* decision by the U.S. Supreme Court finding no federal constitutional right to abortion, more than 100 attacks occurred at pregnancy counseling centers offering alternatives to abortion, as well as at churches and pro-life organizations. These attacks are mostly treated as vandalism and are not counted as “hate crimes.” Few arrests have been made.

Catholic Charities, for all the great work that it does, has drawn some justified criticism for its heavy reliance on federal funding and its apparent open borders policy, as have other religious charities.<sup>10</sup>

The fact remains that religious institutions provide many necessary social services more effectively than government. Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, makes the case for the importance of religious institutions in the following statement in the ASU report:

“Almost two centuries ago, Alexis de Tocqueville commented on the centrality of America’s churches and faith-based institutions to the building of American

society and the health of communities. That is no less true today, and this truth underlines the need for honoring, respecting, and protecting those communities of faith and conviction. This report affirms that truth and makes a powerful argument for affirming the religious liberty and freedom necessary for this good work in communities to continue. This is a challenging report, powerful in content, and it is also a call to action.”

We would all do well to heed this call to action. During the Christmas season, let us remember to try to support and strengthen religious institutions in their charitable mission. *We wish our readers a blessed Christmas, with deep gratitude for your perennial support for the Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation.*

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wordonfire.org/articles/barron/as-i-leave-for-the-second-session-of-the-synod/>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.wordonfire.org/articles/radical-synod-proposals-failed-to-gain-traction/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. For those seeking further reading on the synod, see <https://catholicreview.org/hot-button-issues-raised-by-vatican-synod-called-a-mechanism-to-understand-synodal-method/>; <https://www.ncregister.com/news/progressive-disappointment-at-synod-2024>; <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2024/10/26/synod-synodality-final-document-summary-249122>; <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2024/10/26/the-synod-on-synodality-final-document-what-you-need-to-know/>, and

<https://www.thecatholicthing.org/2024/10/30/leave-the-synod-take-the-cannoli/>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/642548/church-attendance-declined-religious-groups.aspx>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/23/us/young-men-religion-gen-z.html>; [nymag.com/intelligencer/article/will-young-men-take-over-american-christianity.html](https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/will-young-men-take-over-american-christianity.html).

<sup>7</sup> *A Thousand Points of Light*, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. at p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.addictionresource.net/best-drug-rehab-centers/michigan/detroit/>.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2024/02/29/migrants-catholic-charities-usa-immigrants-asylum-texas-paxton-border>; <https://www.heritage.org/homeland-security/heritage-explains/who-helping-biden-facilitate-americas-border-crisis>; <https://www.congress.gov/118/meeting/house/117010/documents/HHRG-118-G006-20240321-SD006.pdf>.

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