

Report: Catholic Church Losing Ground in Latin America

In just one generation, Latin America has seen the number of people who identify themselves as Catholic plummet, with more people becoming Protestant or dropping religion altogether, a new report shows.

The shift is dramatic for a region that has long been a bastion of Catholicism. With more than 425 million Catholics, Latin America accounts for nearly 40 percent of the global Catholic population. Through the 1960s, at least 90 percent of Latin Americans were Catholic, and 84 percent of people surveyed recently by the Pew Research Center said they were raised Catholic.

But the report released Thursday (Nov. 13) found that only 69 percent of Latin Americans still consider themselves Catholic, with more people switching to more conservative Protestant churches (19 percent) or describing themselves as agnostic or religiously unaffiliated (8 percent).

Even last year's election of an Argentine as pope to head the Catholic Church has led to conflicting feelings in Latin America.

"While it is too soon to know whether (Pope) Francis can stop or reverse the church's losses in the region, the new survey finds that people who are currently Catholic overwhelmingly view Francis favorably and consider his papacy a major change for the church," the report said. "But former Catholics are more skeptical about Pope Francis. Only in Argentina and Uruguay do majorities of ex-Catholics express a favorable view of the pope."

The diminished influence of the Catholic Church helps explain why countries in the region have been so quick to adopt laws legalizing abortion, gay marriage and the decriminalization of marijuana. A recent *USA Today* report found that more countries are adopting and debating changes on those contentious social issues, which would have been impossible in previous generations.

People gave Pew a wide variety of reasons for abandoning the Catholic Church. The most common answer was people saying they wanted a more personal connection with God. Others said they enjoyed the style of worship at their new church or that they were looking for a greater emphasis on morality.

Other findings from the report:

- * Evangelization efforts have worked. More than half of the people who switched from the Catholic Church to Protestant churches (58 percent) say their new church reached out to them.

- * The shift in beliefs mirrors those seen in the Hispanic population in the United States. About 22 percent of Hispanics in the U.S. are now members of Protestant churches, compared to 19 percent in Latin America.

- * Despite their affiliated religion, many in the region say they believe in some practices associated with Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Brazilian and indigenous religions. For example, at least a third of adults in every country believe in the “evil eye,” or the idea that some people can cast curses on others.

The report was prepared by conducting 30,000 face-to-face interviews in three languages in 18 countries between October 2013 and February 2014. The margin of error for each country ranges between 2.8 and 4 points.