

The Impact of COVID-19 on U.S. Catholics

Research Findings

April 2022



Objectives & Methodology

Objectives

“Will they come back?” is a question we have heard many times during the span of COVID-19. Of course, this refers to whether, once the COVID-19 pandemic is endemic, will Catholics that used to go to Mass continue to do so. Whether and when we get to an endemic state is for others to discuss. However, we can and did explore the question of the impact of COVID-19 on Mass attendance, as well as other aspects of the spiritual and everyday lives of Catholics. In this survey, we set out to answer the following questions:

- What impact has COVID-19 had on Catholics’ lives, not just from a faith perspective, but from an everyday perspective?
- How has COVID-19 affected Catholics’ faith lives? How many have grown? How many have had less favorable spiritual outcomes?
- How did parishes adapt? What basic changes did they implement? What were Mass streaming practices?
- How will Mass attendance change for the summer of 2022? What has been the affect on Mass attitudes?
- How has charitable giving changed and what are future expectations?

Survey Design

The key questions that formed the structure of the survey are the result of speaking with a local pastor who lamented the lack of data on the COVID-19 impact on Catholics. We developed a loose structure for the survey and then had additional conversations with five priests in other parts of the country. The focus of these conversations was to obtain their perspective on the type of information they would find most helpful, either because it provided insights on the experiences of lay Catholics or to help set future expectations for streaming and in-person Mass attendance.

Based on these conversations, we reworked some of the survey questions, launched the trial survey with a small number of Catholics (from a consumer panel), and made additional revisions based on initial results before finalizing the survey for broader implementation with a large sampling of Catholics, working with Dynata’s national panel of consumers.

Who We Surveyed

We surveyed 1,532 self-identified Catholics across the U.S., requiring that they attended Mass at least once per year before or during COVID-19. The sample initially included 30 who did not attend Mass before COVID-19 but did during COVID-19, but this segment is too small to analyze, so it was left out of this analysis and is not reflected in the 1,532. That makes this a study of Catholics who were, pre-COVID-19, at least somewhat connected to the Faith as measured by connection to the Mass, even if only by a little bit.

Once we reached 1,000 respondents, we focused on more frequent Mass goers so that we could attain a large sample of weekly Mass goers (955 respondents) and monthly Mass goers (422 respondents). These sample sizes allow us to further look at subgroups within each, as needed. Much of the analysis focuses specifically on the pre-COVID-19 weekly+ Mass goers.

The purpose of focusing on more frequent Mass goers was so we could measure the impact of COVID-19, and future intentions, among those who were most often in the pews. However, we have sufficient sample for all three groups based on Mass attendance: frequent Mass goers (weekly or daily), occasional Mass goers (monthly or a few times per year), and infrequent Mass goers (once or twice per year).





How Did COVID-19 Change Catholic Lives?

Impact on Lives

Overall Impact

Without question, COVID-19 has been a challenge to all. Coverage of the suffering due to COVID-19 was robust. However, we also heard about wonderful ways in which the human spirit triumphed and people came together during this time. Churches adapted, people found ways to connect with friends and family, and human kindness abounded. Among Catholics we surveyed, the impact of COVID-19 is mixed, nearly in equal thirds of those who report that their overall lives are better, worse, or the same. Somewhat more, though, say their lives are worse overall - mostly "slightly" worse, but worse, nonetheless.

Figure 1. COVID-19's Impact on Overall Lives



Compared to before the coronavirus pandemic, is your life overall better, worse, or about the same?

n=1,532

Detailed Impact

In which specific areas are Catholics better and worse off today? There are two ways we can examine this question, based on two methods for showing results from a matrix question. The first is to evaluate the full range of the responses given on the scale used (Figure 2). The results are striking - they show that Catholics' faith in God and their prayer life fared the best. Half feel their faith in God is better today than it was before the pandemic, with nearly one-quarter (22%) indicating it is much better today. This contrasts with fewer than 9% who indicate their faith in God is worse off today (to any degree).

It is clear many Catholics are hurting, regardless of how they rated their lives overall. We see this in two areas in particular: personal finances and mental well-being. Four in 10 Catholics report their mental well-being today is worse than before COVID-19. The same is true for personal finances. One quarter report they are worse off in both these areas. And if they were worse off in either of these two, then they suffered in most other areas: relationships, work, health, exercise, diet. Even their prayer life suffered. However, 41% of those who suffered in these two areas indicated that their faith in God was at least slightly better today, half of whom say it is much better today.

Figure 2. Detailed Effect of COVID-19

	Much worse	Somewhat worse	Slightly worse	Same as before	Slightly better	Somewhat better	Much better
Faith in God	5%		41%		14%	14%	22%
Prayer life	7%	6%	37%		18%	12%	16%
Relationships with family		13%	39%		17%	10%	14%
Exercise/fitness	5%	7%	16%	35%		16%	11%
Relationships with friends	5%	5%	23%	38%		10%	7%
Quality of work	6%	5%	12%	53%		9%	8%
Physical well-being/health		9%	20%	37%		13%	9%
Work satisfaction	5%	8%	10%	55%		7%	8%
Diet	7%	10%	20%	37%		14%	6%
Mental well-being	8%	8%	24%	36%		10%	7%
Personal finances	8%	13%	17%	39%		10%	6%

Please indicate how each of the following has been affected as a result of the coronavirus pandemic:

n=1,532

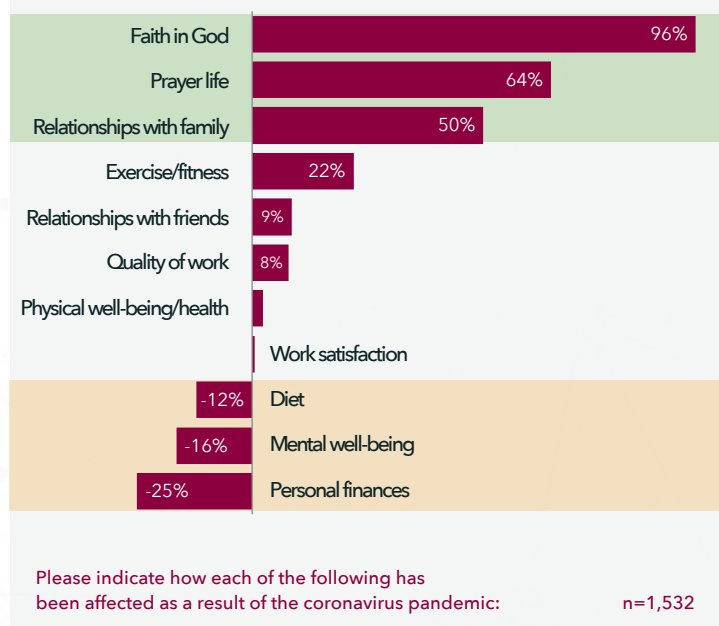
An additional method to evaluate questions like these are to index or to attach a weight to certain points on the scale. In this case, we assigned a weight of +3 to much better, +2 to somewhat better, +1 to slightly better, and a -1, -2, -3 to slightly, somewhat, and much worse, respectively. The result of this weighting is summarized in Figure 3 on the next page.

Impact on Lives

Figure 3 illustrates the overall positive effect of faith in God among Catholics during COVID-19. Prayer life and relationships with family are also strong. Exercise/fitness are in the positive, while diet is in the negative. These are clearly not the same individuals. In fact, among those who indicated their diet was somewhat or much better, 83% said their exercise/fitness was also somewhat or much better.

This analysis shows more clearly that personal finances is slightly more of a problem than mental well-being, driven by the higher percentage who said their mental well-being was slightly worse. Future analysis may evaluate the relationships of all the items captured in this question, through a multivariate approach called cluster analysis.

Figure 3. Detailed Effect of the Pandemic: Weighted



Relating Overall & Detailed Impact Questions

Figures 2 and 3 cover a broad range of topics, two of which are spiritual in nature: faith in God and prayer life. If we compare those results with the overall impact question from Figure 1, we see some encouraging findings:

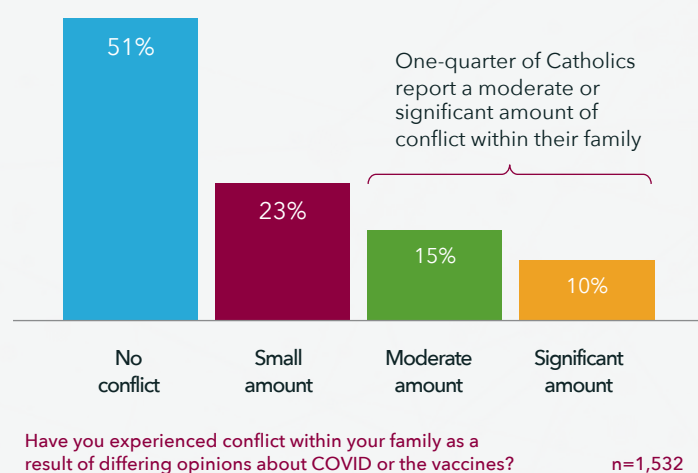
- Among those who are “much better” off today (n=152), nearly three-quarters (71%) also say that their faith in God is much better, and 89% report their faith in God is at least slightly better. This demonstrates a very clear and strong relationship between these items.

- Among those who are “somewhat worse” or “much worse” off today (n=214), more than half (54%) say their faith in God is better (any level of better), and 40% say it was the same as before the pandemic. Only 7% of these Catholics say it was worse.

Family Conflict

While this survey did not go into politics, COVID-19 has been politicized. We touched on one of these areas: conflict in the family due to COVID-19 (see Figure 4). We measured the extent to which there was conflict within the family due to differing opinions about COVID-19 or the vaccines. We learned that half of Catholic households in the survey experienced some level of conflict, with 25% saying there was a moderate or significant amount of conflict.

Figure 4. COVID-19/Vaccine-Related Conflict in the Family



Takeaways

- In times of trial, people can turn toward or away from God. Our research showed that Catholics turned to God and, in seeking meaning or consolation during COVID-19, faith in God for many became stronger.
- Prayer life improved as well, though as we will see later, this did not necessarily translate into more time praying. However, at least Catholics perceive their praying to have improved, which might say more about quality than quantity of prayer.

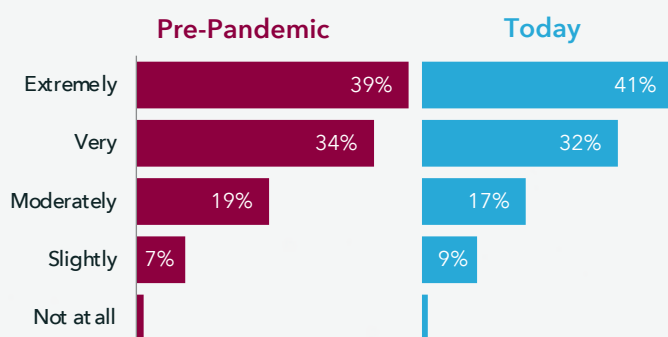


How Did COVID-19 Affect Catholics' Faith Lives?

Impact on Faith

When considering the importance of religion overall in Catholics' lives, not much has changed. Pre-COVID-19, 39% felt religion was extremely important in their lives. Today, that figure is 41% - very close to pre-COVID-19 levels. The same pattern is observed for the other response options provided. In the end, the importance of religion has not changed even though faith in God has improved. However, the baseline for the importance of religion was already high, with 73% indicating religion was very or extremely important (both before COVID-19 and today).

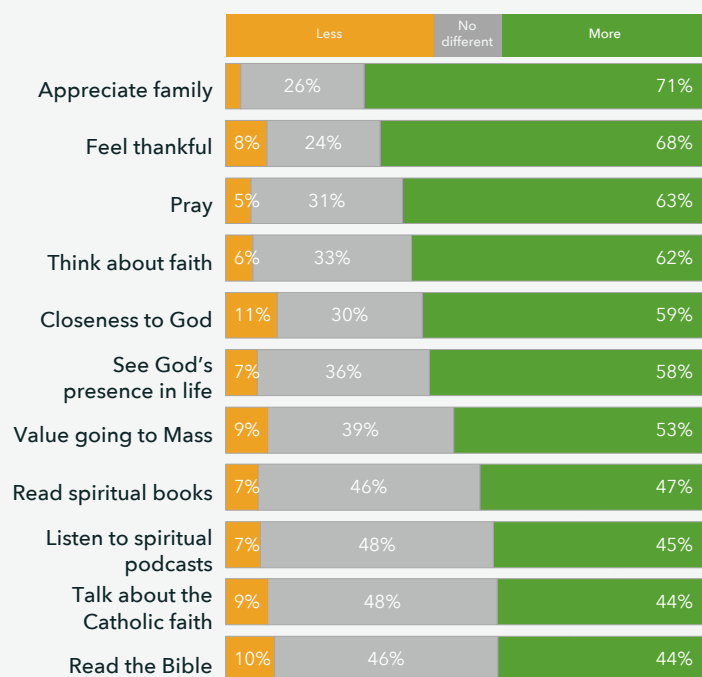
Figure 5. Importance of Religion



How important is religion in your own life today and before the pandemic?

n=1,532

Figure 6. Change in Faith-Related Attitudes



Compared to before the pandemic, do you currently...[item]... much/somewhat/slightly less, no change, or slightly/somewhat/much more? n=1,532

We also explored differences in faith-related attitudes and practices (Figure 6). At a high level, most items measured grew during the pandemic. Chief among these were appreciating family and feeling thankful. Many Catholics also noted that prayer, thinking about the Faith, and seeing God's presence in their lives increased during this time. These items are similar in that they are thoughtful measures.

In terms of the activities, there was less growth, but still meaningful increases in key activities, where a minimum of 40% indicated they were doing more spiritual reading, podcast listening, faith-discussing, or Bible reading. Much of these increases were slight.

Nearly 10% indicated that they valued going to Mass less. Almost all of these were in the "slightly" less category. The majority of these are Catholics who went to Mass less often than weekly before COVID-19, though there were some weekly+ Mass goers who did reveal this sentiment.

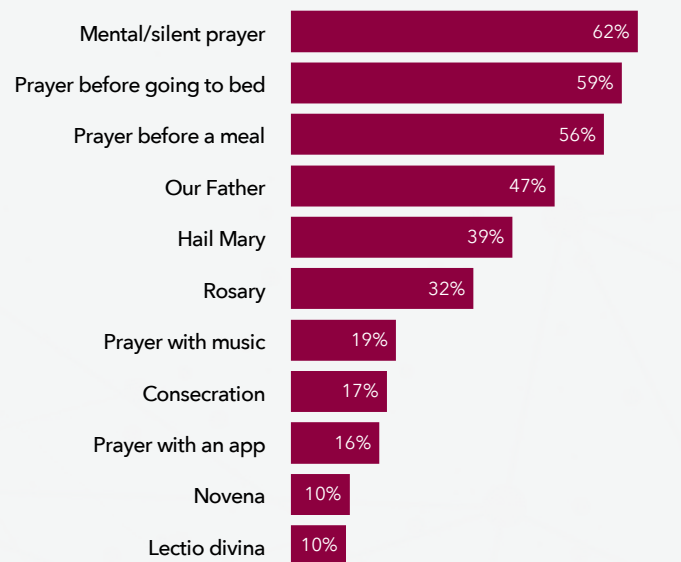
Impact on Faith

Praying

Most Catholics' praying consists of non-rote (non-memorized) prayers (with the possible exception of meals), two of which are linked to an event, such as a meal or bedtime. However, the most common prayer type among those tested is mental/silent prayer. Additionally, the data behind the chart shows that the vast majority of those who pray before going to bed (73%) and mental/silent prayer (62%) are very faithful to that prayer, doing so every night.

The next most said prayer types are traditional Catholic rote (memorized) prayers: the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, and the Rosary, with one-third of Catholics indicating they have prayed a Rosary in the past month. (Recall that the bulk of the sample consists of weekly+ Mass-goers.)

Figure 7. Prayers Said in Past Month

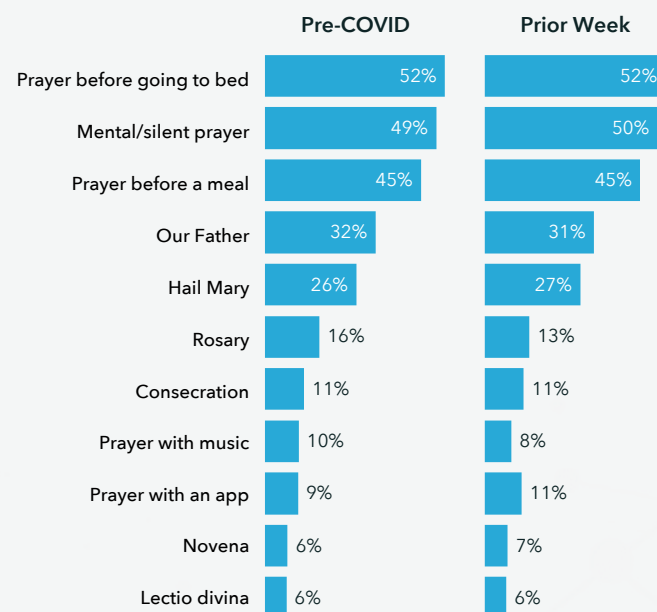


In the past month, which of the following prayer types did you pray at least once?

n=1,532

In order to compare pre-COVID-19 prayer habits to today, we asked how often they prayed each in the past week and in a typical week pre-COVID-19 (see Figure 8). What we observed is that the frequency of praying days was very similar for both periods. This tells us that praying did not, on average, quantitatively change.

Figure 8. Prayers Said 4+ days in Average/Prior Week



In the past week / before the coronavirus pandemic on how many days (pre-pandemic: in an average week) did you pray in each of the following ways?

n=1,532

In Figure 6, however, we saw that many Catholics indicated they were praying more today than before the pandemic. One way to think about the difference in response to these two questions is that one addresses sentiment or perceptions while the other measures quantity and is time-limited. This also may highlight a limitation to the method of questioning used - this is not a longitudinal study where we followed people over time. Instead, we relied on their recall, which is imperfect. Additionally, there could be a "COVID effect", where people have a more difficult time tracking with dates and events that may have occurred before COVID-19. A final explanation may be that the amount of time in prayer, something we did not measure here, may have increased. Instead of doing mental prayer for 5 or 10 minutes, they may now be praying for 15 minutes. Or instead of praying before dinner only, some are now praying before all meals. Perhaps in the future, we will conduct a study solely on prayer to better understand these practices.

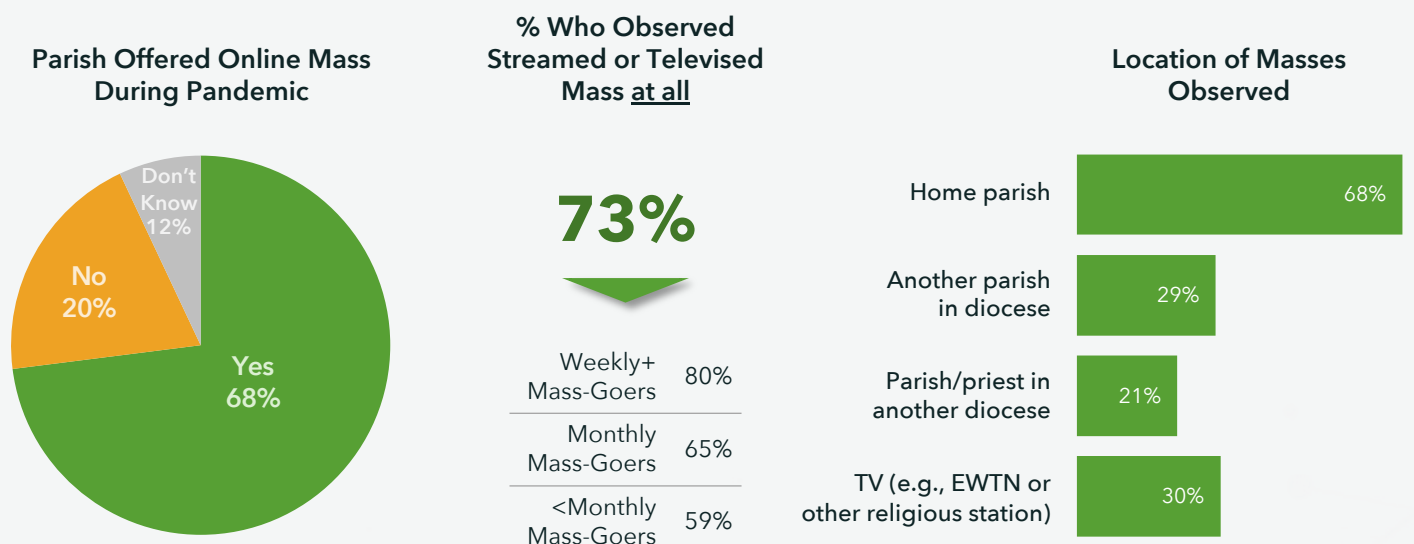
The key prayer takeaways from these findings are that, at a minimum, Catholics have not stopped praying, they feel better about their praying, and tend to pray silently over rote prayers, though rote prayers clearly have a meaningful place in the prayer lives of many Catholics.



Parish Life

Streaming Practices

Figure 9. Online Practices During COVID-19



The vast majority of Catholics reported that their parish offered Mass online at some point during the pandemic. Some (12%) were not aware of their parish's online status. These were largely those who, pre-COVID-19, attended the Mass less than weekly.

Nearly three-quarters of Catholics observed streamed or televised Mass at any point during the pandemic. This was higher among those who went to Mass more often before COVID-19, but the majority of all Mass-frequency segments did view Mass at least once. And while most observed Masses from their home parishes, many also viewed Mass from other locations.

As shown in Figure 10 below, and considering those who went to Mass at least monthly before COVID-19 (who would be more familiar with parish practices), the majority report that their parishes required masks at Mass. This was much higher among Hispanic Catholics (77%), which will be the subject of a follow-up report to this one.

Additionally, 40% report that their parish was streaming Masses online as of February 2022, a sizable drop from the 68% indicating their parish streamed Masses at any point during the pandemic.

Figure 10. Parish Status (as of February 2022): Among Pre-COVID-19 Monthly+ Mass-Goers



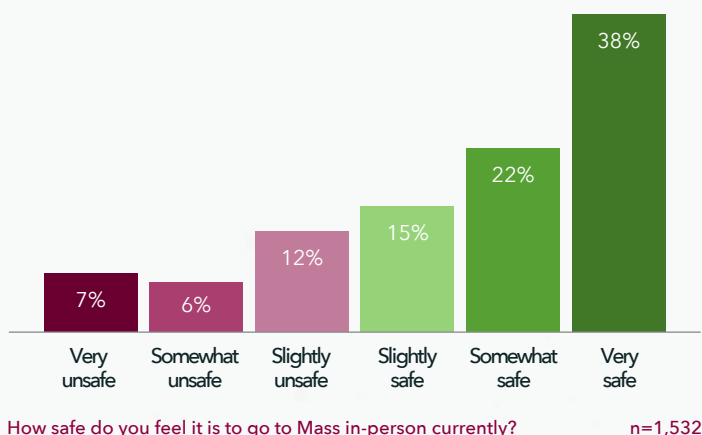
Do you currently have to wear a mask at Mass? Parish offers online Mass

n=1,213

Parish Safety

With ratings scales, we often focus on what is called a “top two box” result, which is the highest two points on the rating scale. However, in the case of safety, we feel that the higher bar “very safe” should be the focus. Our data show that only 38% felt it was very safe to be at Mass in-person.

Figure 11. Feeling of Safety

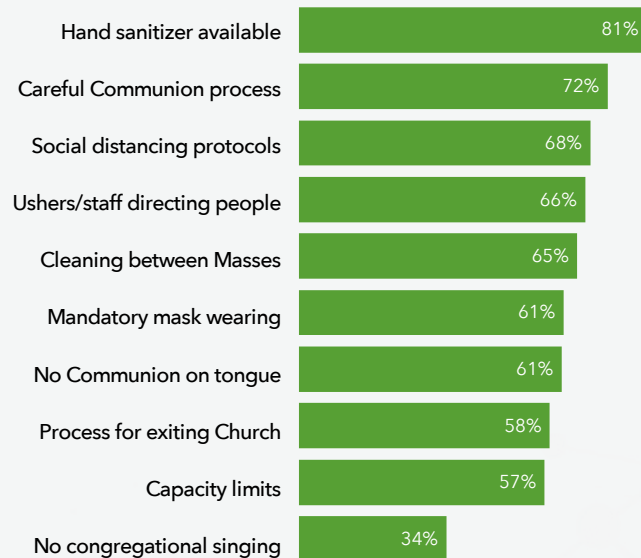


Across all those surveyed, the most common safety measures parishes have implemented included hand sanitizers, a careful process for receiving Communion, social distancing protocols, and ushers/staff opening doors and directing people. A number of other measures were reported by at least half of our respondents. These results indicate that parishes have implemented diverse measures to keep their parishioners safe.

We compared the extremes of perceived safety to see if their parishes implemented different safety measures (Figure 12) and found there were very large differences in the measures they reported their parish to have implemented. [For the three items with an asterisk (*), these changes were also observed among weekly+ Mass goers.] This could either be a lack of familiarity with the measures in place or a very real difference where those who feel their parish is unsafe are attending parishes that have presumably lessened some of the measures that were in place earlier.

At the time of this analysis, reports are that COVID-19 cases are slowly starting to rise. It would benefit parishes to either consider instituting some of these measures or to find ways to communicate the various measures that are in place for those who remain concerned about safety. In messaging, repetition is key.

Figure 12. Parish Safety Measures Implemented



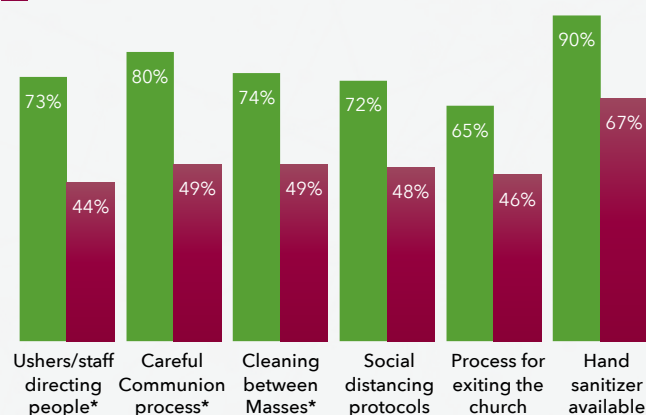
Are the following safety measures being implemented at your home parish? Response options: yes, no, I don't know

n=1,532

Figure 13. Parish Safety Measures Implemented (cont.)

Among Catholics who feel their parish is:

Very safe (n=581)
Somewhat, or very unsafe (n=207)



Are the following safety measures being implemented at your home parish? Response options: yes, no, I don't know



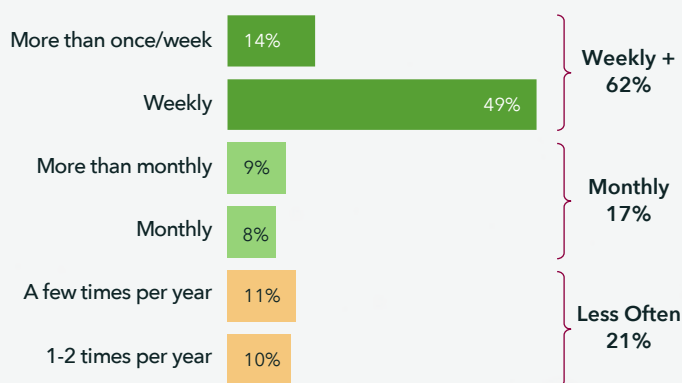
Mass Attendance

Mass Attendance

Pre-COVID-19 Mass Attendance

Our sample was designed to consist predominantly of those who attend Mass more frequently. Among our study respondents, nearly two-thirds attend Mass weekly or more often. The other third of respondents were roughly split between those who attended Mass monthly and those who attended Mass less frequently. The sample sizes are sufficient for analysis of all three groups, but we will largely focus this Mass section on the 62% who attended Mass at least weekly (sample size = 955).

Figure 14. Pre-COVID-19 Frequency of Mass attendance



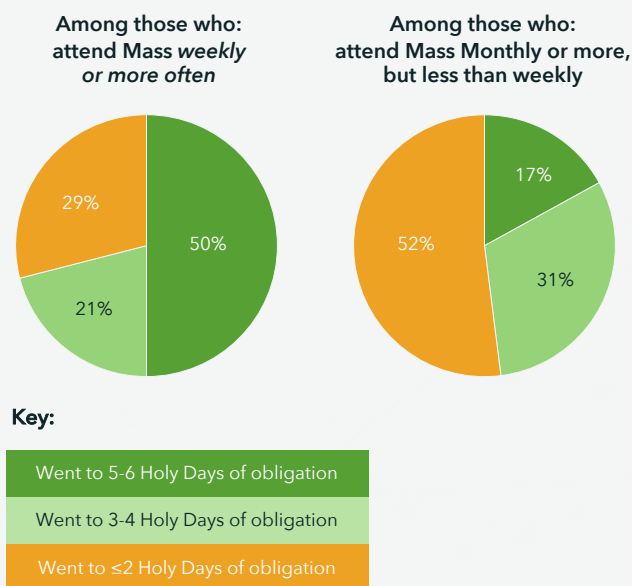
Before the coronavirus pandemic, how often did you typically go to Mass?

n=1,532

One item that is not often measured is attendance of Holy Days of obligation. We asked about attendance of Holy Days in our survey and found that even weekly+ Mass goers fall short of the full obligation: half of those who go to Mass weekly typically went to all Holy Days before the pandemic. What's more, 29% went to two or fewer of the six Holy Days. Attendance of Holy Days is, not surprisingly, highly correlated with weekly Mass attendance - those who went to Mass monthly were even less likely to go to Mass on these Holy Days.

[Note that we grouped five to six days as effectively being "compliant" with Holy Day Mass attendance because not all are days of obligation if they fall on a Saturday or Monday. Additionally, the Ascension of Jesus is often celebrated on the Sunday following 40 days from Easter.]

Figure 15. Holy Days of Obligation Attendance (pre-COVID-19)



Key:

- Went to 5-6 Holy Days of obligation
- Went to 3-4 Holy Days of obligation
- Went to ≤2 Holy Days of obligation

Holy Days 2021:

- Solemnity of Mary (Jan. 1)
- Ascension of Jesus (May)
- Assumption of the Virgin Mary (Aug)
- All Saints' Day (Nov 1)
- Conception of the Virgin Mary (Dec 8)
- Christmas (Dec 25)

Before the coronavirus pandemic, for which of the 6 holy days of obligation did you typically go to Mass?

n=1,532

Not surprisingly, those who attend Mass monthly are much less likely to go to Mass on Holy Days of obligation. Slightly more than half of these respondents go to two or fewer. Only 2% do not go to any (included within the two or fewer).

The large majority of weekly Mass goers will continue to attend/observe Mass this summer.

Mass Attendance

Future Mass Attendance/Observation Among Pre-COVID-19 Weekly Mass Goers

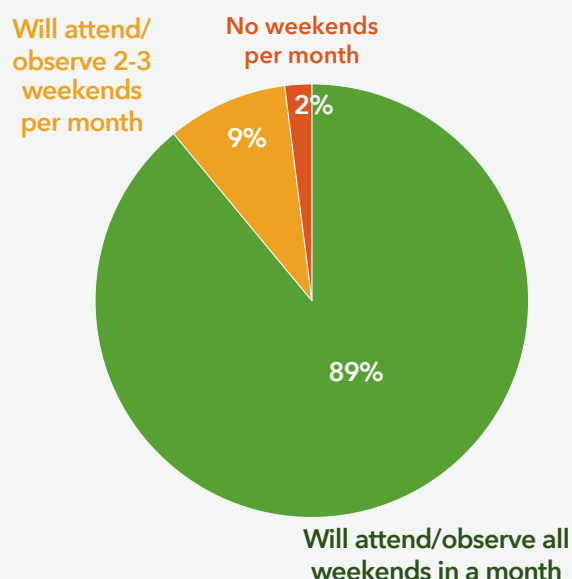
To assess Catholics' future Mass intentions, we asked two Mass attendance questions in a way that allowed us to see if and how Catholics will be coming back to the Mass at pre-COVID-19 levels.

Figure 16. Mass Attendance Questions

For a typical four-weekend month, on how many weekends did/will they do each?

Pre-COVID-19:	Summer 2022:
# weekends physically went to Mass	# weekends will physically go to Mass
# weekends did not go to Mass	# weekends will watch Mass
4 = total	# weekends will not go to Mass
	4 = total

Figure 17. Expected Mass Practices Summer 2022



n=744

Because we are focused on a four-weekend month, **we limited this analysis to those who attended Mass at least weekly and answered all of the questions in this section of the survey.** This resulted in a sample size of 744. Additionally, focusing on weekly+ Mass goers allows us to measure future plans among those most frequently in the pews.

Our first observation is that the majority, though not all, expect to stay connected to the Mass every week. As shown in Figure 17, among those who attended Mass weekly+ before COVID-19, 89% will attend or observe Mass every weekend in a month, 9% will attend/observe Mass 2-3 times per month, and 2% will not attend/observe any Masses.

While 2% is a small figure, these respondents show how far some have fallen from the Mass during this time – they previously went to Mass every week and now are not going at all. An additional 9% may be heading in the same direction, though at a slower pace, since they expect their weekly Mass involvement to be less than it was previously.

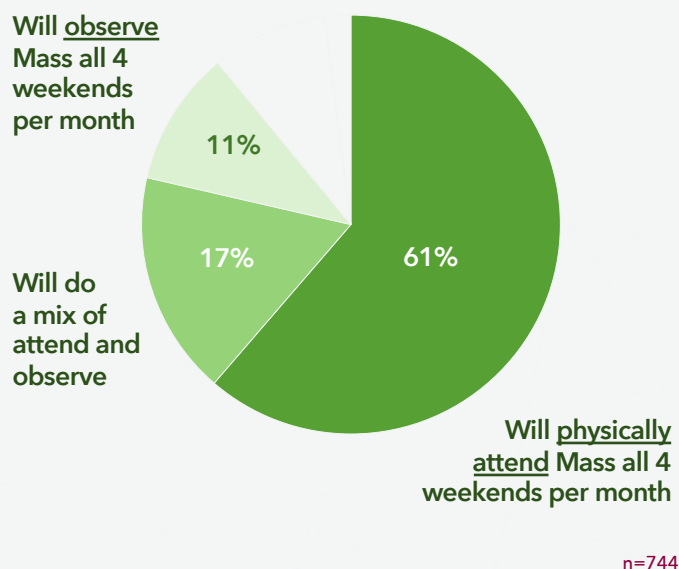
While Catholics have begun a return to Mass, many regular Mass-goers are still not ready to be physically present at Mass every weekend.

Mass Attendance

Future Physical Mass Attendance

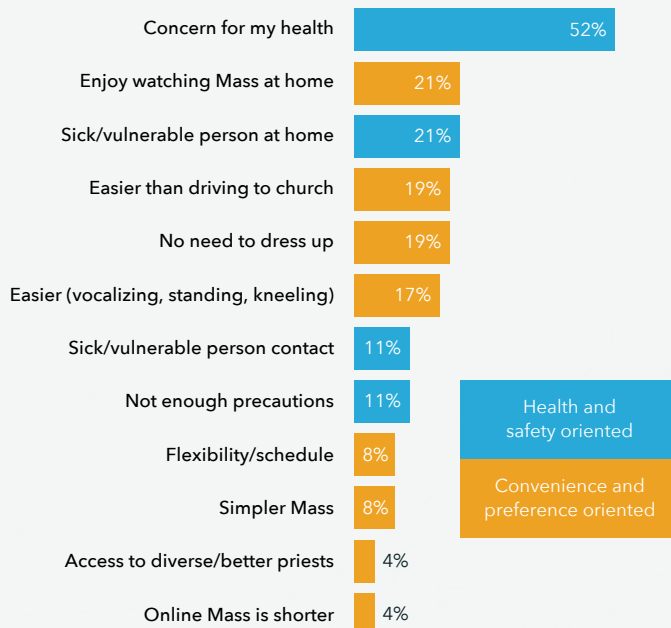
More troubling is what happens when we evaluate physical attendance versus virtual/streamed observation. Only six in 10 previous weekly Mass-goers expect to be back to “full time” in-person Mass attendance this summer. Additionally, one in 10 prior weekly Mass-goers do not expect to be physically present at any Masses. The remainder will do a mix of attending and observing Masses.

Figure 18. Expected Physical Mass Attendance Summer 2022



In a separate line of questioning, we asked those who do not expect to be physically back at Mass in the next three months why that is. The most often selected reason for not being physically present at Mass had to do with concern over their personal health. However, a number selected “convenience” reasons for not physically attending Mass, such as simply enjoying Mass at home, not having to drive, and not having to dress up (see Figure 19). Some of the reasons also had to do with less demand on participating either through posture or the congregational responses.

Figure 19. Reasons for Not Attending Mass In-Person



Why are you unlikely to attend Mass in-person in the next 3 months? n=251

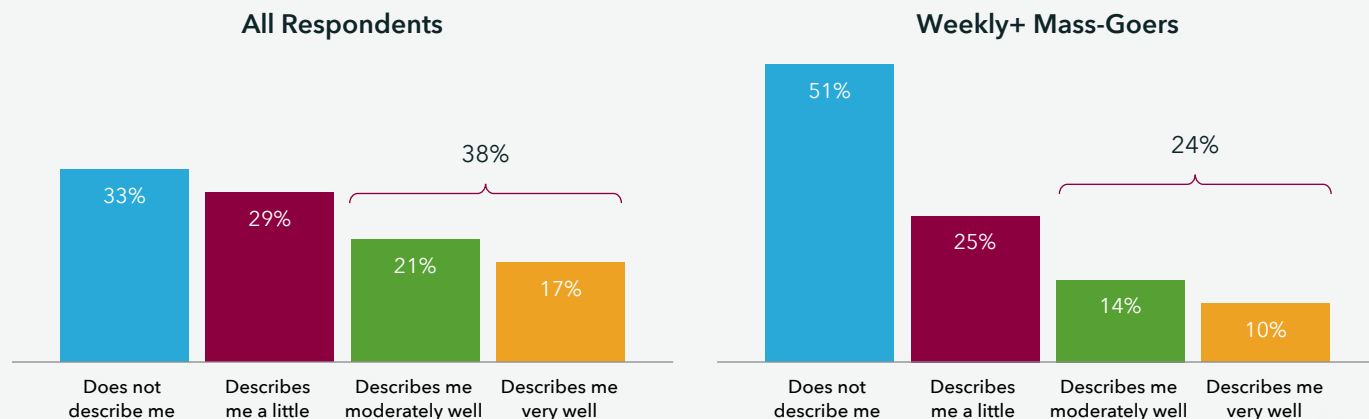
Overall, 40% of respondents chose only health and safety related reasons for not attending Mass physically, compared to 32% who chose only convenience reasons and 26% who selected both categories of responses.

Is COVID-19 the problem?

The findings in this section are the most troubling in this report. *What's more, the trends seen here are the same regardless of Mass attendance frequency.* We believe that too many Catholics fundamentally do not understand or appreciate the Mass. This makes recovery from COVID-19 more difficult. Further study is needed to explore the underlying understanding of and motivations (obligation versus desire versus habit) of Mass attendance among Catholics to better understand how best to turn this trend around and have Catholics see the Mass for what it is and not “settle” for streaming Masses from home.

Figure 20. Sentiment Agreement

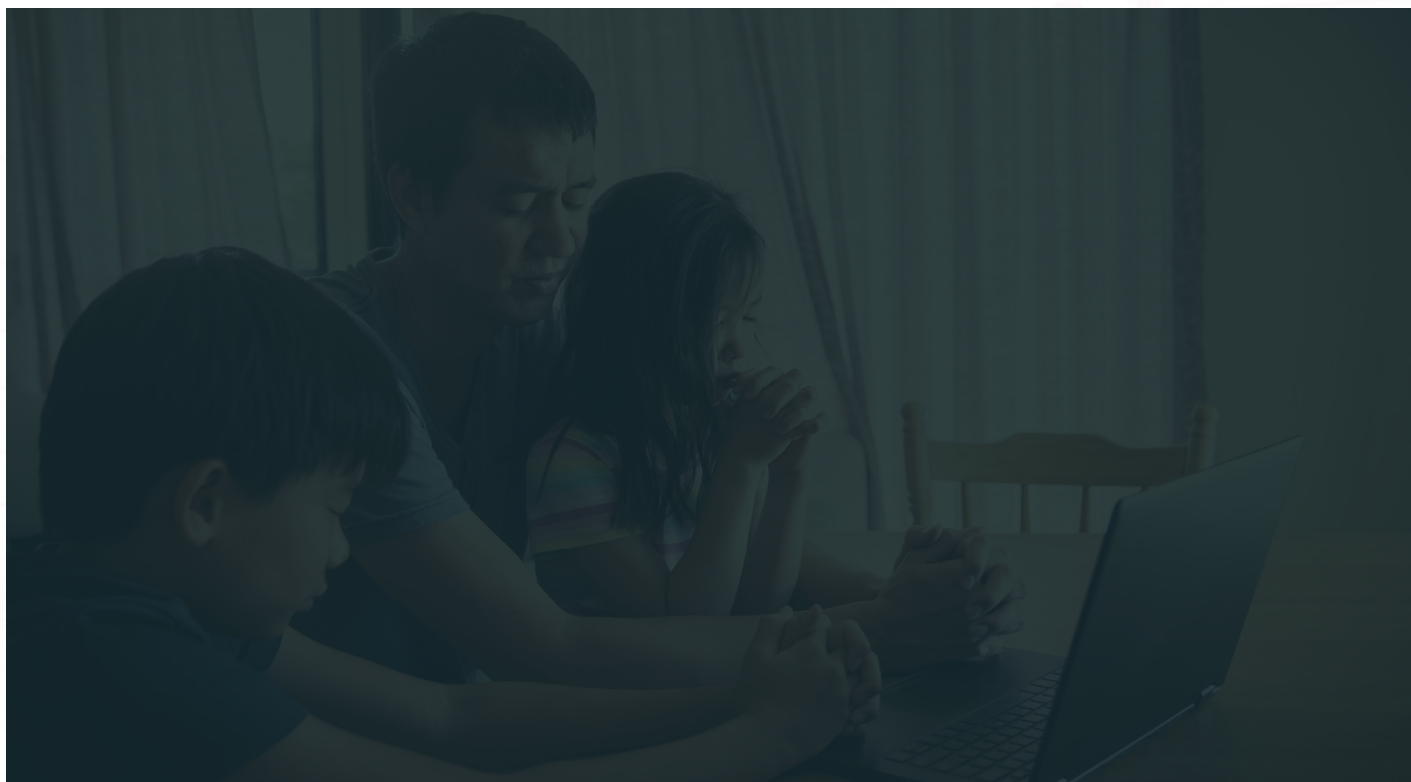
I have grown accustomed to not being at church



How well do each of these statements describe you / your feelings?

n=1,532 and 744

From a sentiment or attitudinal perspective, a large number of Catholics have grown accustomed to not being at church. This is true even among nearly one-quarter (25%) of Catholics who regularly attend Mass (weekly or more often). Among those who select moderately or very well for this sentiment, 79% expect to attend or view Mass all four weekends of a four-weekend month by the summer of 2022, down from 89% for all weekly+ Mass goers.

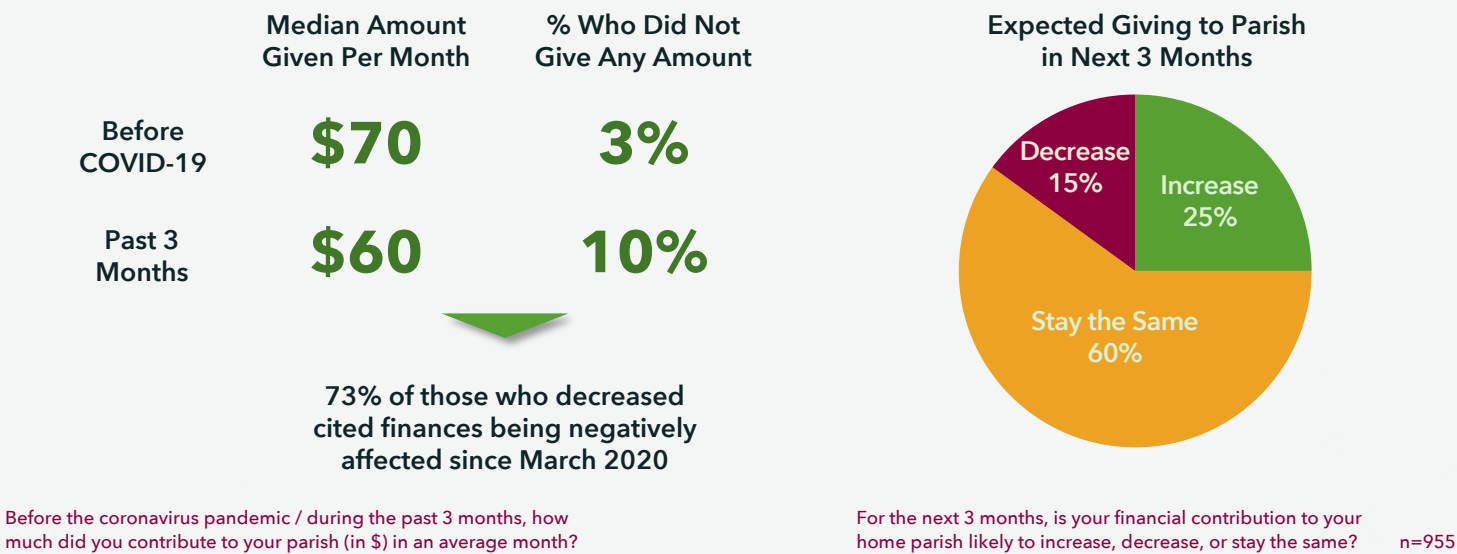


A large, light-colored wooden crucifix is mounted on a wall inside a church. The crucifix is set against a dark, arched background. In the foreground, a person's hand is visible, holding a small object, possibly a candle or a flower, near the base of the crucifix. The overall scene is dimly lit, with the light source coming from the left, creating a dramatic effect.

How Will Catholics' Financial Giving Change?

Financial Giving

Figure 18. Financial Giving Snapshot Among Pre-COVID-19 Weekly+ Mass Goers



For open-ended numeric responses, where there is no cap or maximum amount, we prefer to report on medians over means as a measure of central tendency because medians are much less affected by outliers. This also helps take away some of the judgement involved in removing outliers when using means. Based on the medians, parishioners are currently giving 14% less to their parishes per month than they were prior to COVID-19 . Of note, the percentage who average \$0 per month increased from 3% to 10%. Not surprisingly, most of those who decreased their monthly giving indicated their finances have been negatively affected during this time.

Thinking ahead to the next three months, well over half expect their giving level to remain the same. Of the remaining Catholics, nearly twice as many expect to increase their giving as expect to decrease their giving, suggesting that financial giving is starting a return to pre-COVID-19 levels.



Key Findings and Next Steps

Key Findings and Next Steps

This report reveals important findings:

- Catholics had highly varying experiences as a result of COVID-19 – some suffered a great deal, many not at all. What was consistent, though, is that faith in God did not follow the level of suffering. Faith in God remained as before or stronger and transcended personal experiences (good or bad) these last couple of years.
- During COVID-19, Catholics have grown in the “thoughtful” characteristics the most, such as appreciating family and feeling thankful. There is also growth in positive feelings toward prayer and thinking about the Faith. Activities also have grown, but at a lower rate.
- While most weekly+ Mass goers will remain anchored to Sunday Mass, there is a concerning level of expected lowering of in-person Mass attendance for the near future (summer 2022). Continued efforts are needed to bring people back to in-person Mass and shift attitudes around virtual Mass viewing.

There are two clear next steps:

- The first is on our part, which is to conduct deep dive analyses into the data, including cluster analyses on questions with several lists and looking at subgroups such as men vs. women, age, and Hispanics.
- The other is for the broader Church and the apostolates who serve it, based on a question: seeing these results, what does this help answer and what outstanding or additional questions do you have? The answer to these questions will help guide our analysis of these results. They can also be the basis on which future research projects can be conceptualized and conducted.

About Vinea

Vinea Research is a Catholic market research firm that conducts quantitative and qualitative research to provide real data and insights to help parishes, apostolates, and ministries better understand the people they serve.

To learn more about Vinea or to explore a potential project, visit VineaResearch.com

