



Do Catholics *Truly Believe* **in the Real Presence?**

*An Exploration of the Critical Importance of Word Choice
when Asking Questions about the Catholic Faith*

Language Matters

Pew Research Center Survey[†]

In 2019, Pew Research Center conducted a study that included, among other items, Catholics' belief in transubstantiation. Pew asked the following two questions about transubstantiation:

1. Which of the following best describes Catholic teaching about the bread and wine used for Communion? The bread and wine...
 - a. Actually become the body and blood of Jesus Christ
 - b. Are symbols of the body and blood of Jesus Christ
 - c. Not sure
2. Regardless of the official teaching of the Catholic Church, what do you personally believe about the bread and wine used for Communion? During Catholic Mass, the bread and wine...
 - a. Actually become the body and blood of Jesus Christ
 - b. Are symbols of the body and blood of Jesus Christ

"Actually become," is not language that the Catholic Church uses in teaching on transubstantiation. Paragraph 1374 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) states:

*...the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, the whole Christ is **truly**, really, and substantially contained." "This presence is called '**real**'...." (emphasis added)*

In other place in the CCC and USCCB language, **real presence** and **truly present** are used. How would the results differ if better Catholic terminology were used? We sought to answer this question.

How We Measured Belief

To evaluate the impact of question wording on this topic, we conducted an experiment where we sampled over 2,000 Catholics and split the sample so that half saw Pew's wording and the other half saw the questions with language more inline with Catholic teaching on the subject. Because we wanted to compare results to Pew's language, we used the same wording structure and question length as Pew's wording. Our revised versions of Pew's questions were as follows:

1. Which of the following best describes Catholic teaching about the bread and wine used for Communion?
 - a. Jesus Christ is truly present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist
 - b. Bread and wine are symbols of Jesus, but Jesus is not truly present
 - c. Not sure
2. Regardless of the official teaching of the Catholic Church, what do you personally believe about the bread and wine used for Communion?
 - a. Jesus Christ is truly present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist
 - b. Bread and wine are symbols of Jesus, but Jesus is not truly present

We added "but Jesus is not truly present" to the symbol option to make the dichotomous nature of the question clearer.

[†] A summary of the Pew findings can be found on page 6.

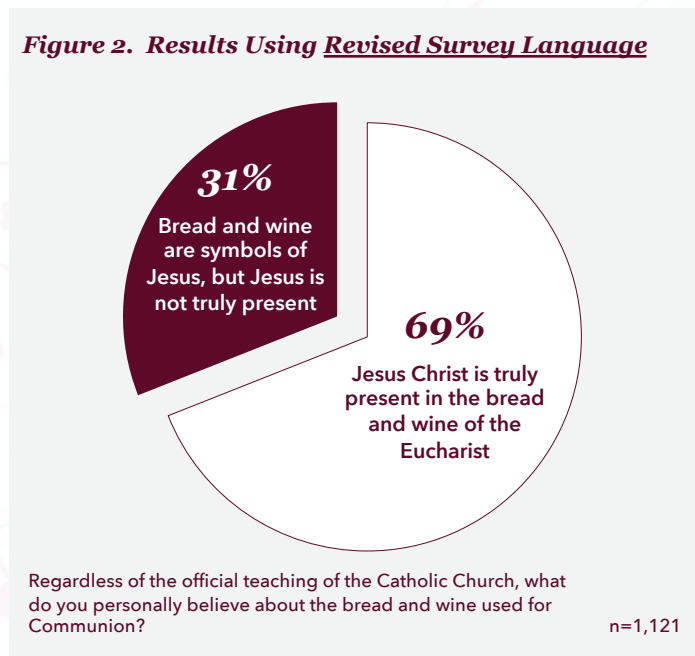
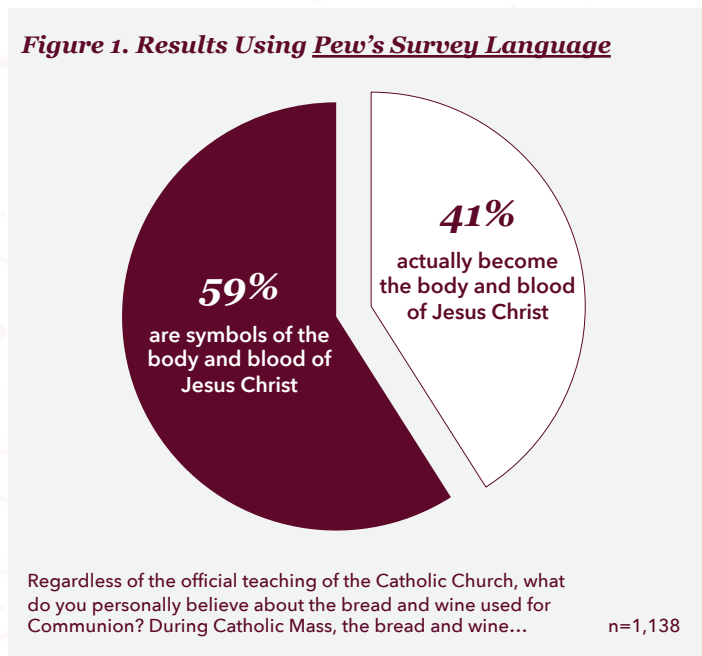


Our Results

Comparing Language

Going into the study, we hypothesized that the more proper framing of the question would lead to an increased percentage of Catholics agreeing with Church teaching on transubstantiation. This was confirmed in the research. What was surprising to us was the magnitude of the difference between the two sets of questions. Whereas our use of Pew’s language resulted in seeing 41% of Mass-going Catholics agree with Church teaching (see Figure 1), that figure increased to 69% of Catholics with the revised language (see Figure 2). That’s a nearly 70% increase in the positive outcome, which is extremely high. From our experience in conducting other types of language assessments, mostly message testing, we can attest to the significance of the magnitude of these findings.

One might think it reasonable to apply this degree of difference of question wording to Pew’s results, which would yield a result of greater than 50% believing in transubstantiation - still a lower figure than it should be, but far different from the 34% that Pew found. However, given methodological differences (described later), that is more of an interesting thought-experiment than a definitive conclusion we can draw. What we can say is that, within our experiment, question wording mattered greatly and that using better survey language has a significant difference in the outcome.



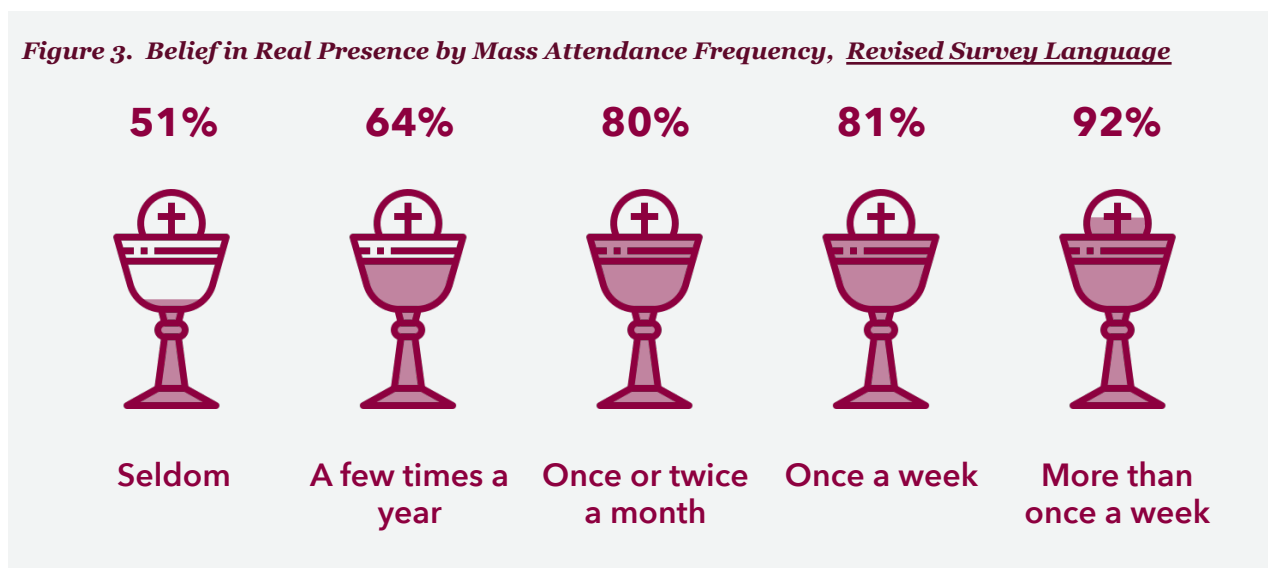
While we did not perform an in-depth comparison of our results to a similar study conducted by Georgetown’s Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), our results (69%) are very similar to CARA’s (64%), though CARA’s approach also differed from Pew’s and our approach.

Our Results

Results by Mass Attendance Levels

While 69% represents the percent of all U.S. Mass-going Catholics in our study who believe in the Real Presence, that result not surprisingly varies by Mass attendance levels. The more frequently someone attends Mass, the more likely they are to believe in the Real Presence (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Belief in Real Presence by Mass Attendance Frequency, Revised Survey Language



Interestingly, nearly two-thirds (64%) of Catholics who attend Mass only a few times per year believe in the Real Presence, as do approximately half of those who attend Mass even less frequently. We have a couple observations considering these results:

- The upward trend in belief in the Real Presence by Mass attendance frequency is indicative of strong correlation between those two data points. The more someone believes, the more likely that person will want to receive the Eucharist, and the more regularly that person will go to Mass.
- However, the questions, as worded, do not measure strength or conviction of belief in the Real Presence. We would suspect that frequent Mass-goers believe in the Real Presence more fervently than less frequent Mass-goers and that conviction of belief is even more strongly correlated with Mass attendance.
- Fundamentally, though, our view is that a simple two-option survey question is suboptimal as an approach to assessing belief in the Real Presence. It can provide a snapshot, but a very imperfect one.

Our Results

Approach and Limitations

In late 2022, we were getting ready to field a survey to assess Catholics' familiarity and belief in different parts of the kerygma. In that study we were planning to have over 2,000 respondents, which is a robust sample. We split that sample in two and had one half of the sample (1,138 survey respondents) answer the Pew version of the questions and the other half (1,121 respondents) answer Vinea's versions of the questions. We then weighted our sample to match the U.S. population on the basis of sex, age, ethnicity, education level, children under the age of 18, and frequency of Mass attendance using Harvard's Cooperative Election Study Common Content from 2022, a nationally representative sample of 60,000 American adults.†

Pew's sampling approach with the ATP, referred to as probability sampling, is the gold standard method for obtaining a representative set of survey respondents. Given resource constraints, and because our focus was more on comparing question structure versus projecting results to a larger population, we worked with a consumer panel company, ThinkNow. While this approach allows us to make direct comparisons of our two research arms, we cannot conduct a truly direct comparison to Pew's findings given the different sampling approaches. However, the magnitude of difference in results does allow us to make inferences between the two approaches.

Implications

Many Catholic leaders rightly responded to Pew Research Center's findings with great concern because of the implications of the results and the centrality of the Eucharist to our Catholic faith. While updating the results with more accurately worded questions should not diminish the value of having greater emphasis on the Eucharist, it is always best to work with accurate information.

The experiment we conducted should serve as a reminder of the importance of language use and question structure when measuring Catholic beliefs, especially when working with non-Catholic organizations who may not recognize the importance of subtle wording changes (e.g., praying "with" the saints vs. "through" the saints vs. "to" the saints).

† Schaffner, Brian; Ansolabehere, Stephen; Shih, Marissa, 2023, "Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2022", <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/PR4L8P>, Harvard Dataverse, V3



Pew Research Summary

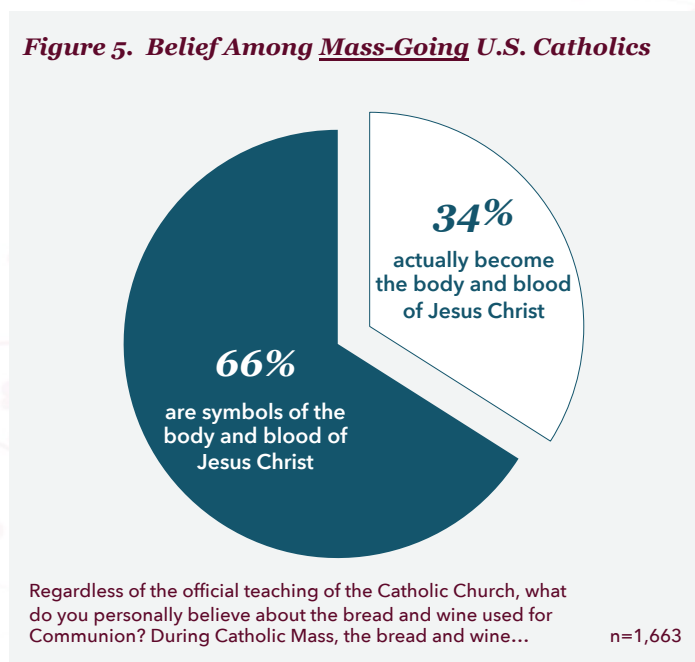
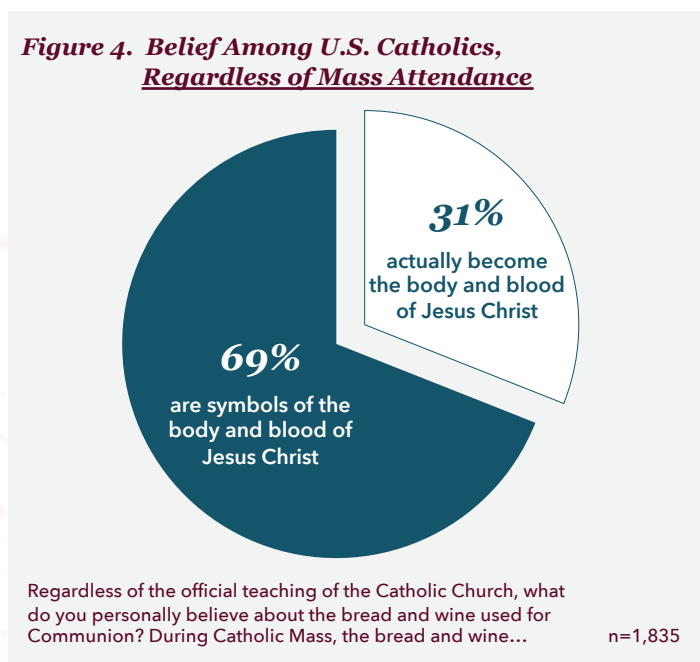
Background

In 2014, Pew Research Center created the American Trends Panel (ATP) to have an efficient way of collecting public opinion research on a variety of topics. In 2019, Wave 44 was conducted to assess Americans' knowledge about various religions, including their own.

The analysis of Wave 44 focused on Americans' knowledge of various religions (Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, etc.). They also did more in-depth analysis on how knowledgeable people were with their own religion: Jews with Judaism, Protestants with Christianity, Catholics with Catholicism, etc.

What Pew Research Found

Pew Research's headline on the Catholicism findings was very provocative: "Just one-third of U.S. Catholics agree with their church that Eucharist is body, blood of Christ." Also observing that Catholicism teaches that the Eucharist is the "source and summit of the Christian life," they noted that many Catholics do not currently believe this. Figure 4 below shows their results for all U.S. Catholics; Figure 5 looks at U.S. Mass-going Catholics only.



Our criticism of Pew's framing of these questions centers on two points:

- *Question wording accuracy* - A more accurate wording of the question would include "real presence" or "true presence" to be more accurate and familiar to Catholics and consistent with Church teaching.
- *Dichotomous question structure* - This structure is often used in question wording, such as yes/no, support/oppose, approve/disapprove. However, for more nuanced questions, a larger scale is used. This should have been the case with beliefs on the Eucharist, which are more nuanced than a true/false structuring would accommodate.

Concluding Thoughts

1

Pew asked a **complex question** in a **dichotomous way**, providing only two options. We do not believe this is how you gauge belief in the Real Presence. At a minimum, you need to ask about belief and conviction of belief. But even that is likely insufficient; many other questions should be considered: Do they believe it enough to find a Mass when traveling? Do they frequently go to confession? What is the root cause of their belief, lack of belief, or doubt? The answer to these question are found in a study, not in two questions.

2

Clearly, **how a question is worded matters greatly** and affects the results of whatever you are measuring. In this case, we believe we demonstrated how Pew's wording may have greatly underestimated the percent of Catholics who believe in the Real Presence. While we developed what we feel is a better question, the complex nature of the question leads us to believe the real answer is somewhere between Pew's results and ours.

3

The good news is that **a large percentage of Catholics**, even those who do not go to Mass frequently, **express some level of belief in the Real Presence**. While their level of belief is not sufficient to have them attend Mass more regularly, this represents a connection - albeit by a thread - that will hopefully lead to future stronger belief through evangelization efforts and prayer.

4

Importantly, we should not lose sight of the fact that the Pew study demonstrated that **Catholics struggle with their belief in transubstantiation**. When faced with the choice between an unfamiliar term ("actually become") and the bread and wine as symbols, many still chose the latter option. To truly understand Catholics' belief in the Real Presence, further study - including qualitative and quantitative research - is warranted.

5

We do not believe Pew Research Center had any negative intentions when they sought to measure Catholics' belief in the Real Presence. However, the study design, results, and subsequent effects demonstrate the **need for Catholic strategic researchers**, such as Vinea Research - who know how to design research, interpret the results, and apply the results through a Catholic lens - as the ones to provide Catholic information and insights.