

5 Insights from Over 1 Million Voices

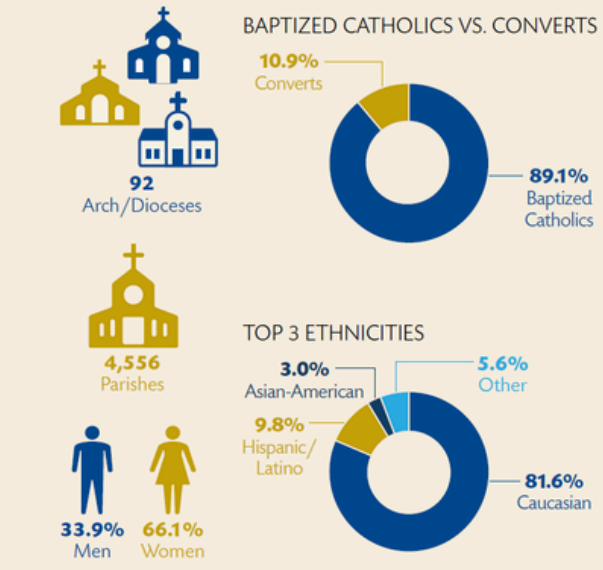
Since 2014, Catholic Leadership Institute (CLI) has been surveying parishioners throughout the United States and Canada with two desired outcomes: to assess where people are in relationship with their parish and to gauge their readiness to fulfill the call of every baptized Catholic to go and "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19).

As of 2026, the Disciple Maker Index (DMI) survey stands as the world's largest study on parish life, representing the voices of **more than 1,000,000 Catholics**. Survey responses represent over **4,500 parishes** and more than **92 arch/dioceses**. The survey has been administered in **19 different languages**. Over the course of a decade, CLI has been able to track the movements in the data over time and within subsets of specific parishes and dioceses.

These aren't just numbers. They are the voices of the People of God and some of our most engaged people in the practice of the Catholic faith. While it's understandable and prudent to want to hear from those who are not practicing their faith, Catholic Leadership Institute is focusing on the importance of equipping current disciples so they can be sent out to share the Gospel with others.

Catholic Leadership Institute continues to leverage data science to understand the layers of insights that this rich and growing body of research provides to the Church as a whole and to individual communities of faith practice. Included in this *Quintessentials* resource are the five most important insights that we believe are relevant to any parish. Accompanying them are practical suggestions on how to apply learnings to parish leadership for the benefit of the faithful.

BEYOND THE NUMBERS: A SNAPSHOT



Source: Catholic Leadership Institute, Disciple Maker Index (DMI), April 2026.

1. The Pastor is the number one most statistically significant driver of parish growth.

Since 2014, the most statistically significant driver of a parish's projected growth or decline has been the extent to which the parishioners strongly recommend their pastor to a friend.



"Data is the product of many contributors and should not be treated as something to be sold off or entrusted to a select few. It is necessary to think creatively in order to manage data as a common or shared good..."

Pope Leo XIV, Magnifica Humanitas (108)

Most people understand that leadership always matters. However, the leadership impact of a pastor on a parish community seems to influence all other statistical drivers of growth (e.g. hospitality, preaching, formation, etc.). According to CLI's most recent logistic regression analysis, the magnitude remains enormous. The average parishioner in the United States is **nine times more likely** to strongly recommend their parish if they strongly recommend their pastor. Parishioners are also **four times more likely** to strongly agree that the parish is helping them grow spiritually.

Over the duration of the study, Catholic Leadership Institute has identified several key considerations and actions related to this factor:

- **Pastors need to be attentive to impressions made in small moments.** CLI's qualitative research shows that parishioners are more likely to form their impressions of their pastors based off small moments rather than large public moments or events. Parishioners appreciate a good homilist and a savvy administrator. However, they appreciate even more pastors who demonstrate appropriate vulnerability and a ministry of presence. Seemingly small interactions after Mass on Sunday or at the school, dinners in family homes and trips to the hospital, leave lasting impacts.
- **Parish staff and volunteers can help (or hurt) this dynamic.** Discord or cohesiveness of parish staff dynamics will also affect this statistical driver. While ultimately the pastor is responsible for cultivating a strong culture, parish staff and key volunteers can play a significant role in modeling and reflecting a healthy dynamic and complementing and augmenting the pastor's natural abilities. Given that most parishioners spend less than 2-3 hours on the parish campus, what they hear "through the grapevine" can heavily influence perception.
- **The bishop and diocesan leadership can and should be intentional, especially during changes of assignments**. A change in pastor can dramatically shift the stability of the parish within one year. While the priest personnel board may invest significant discernment in selecting the right pastor, equal, if not more, time should be spent considering how to support the new pastor and the community in starting off on the right foot. Ongoing formation, strong communication, and consistent financial, operational, and pastoral accompaniment on the part of the diocese can help avoid unnecessary conflict in those all-important first months of a transition.

2. Parishes can use segmentation to drive ministry and outreach.



While almost 90% of DMI respondents indicate that they go to Mass at least weekly, the study reveals what we sometimes forget: the spiritual life is not a one-size fits all reality, even for those who are regularly in the pews. Catholic Leadership Institute has analyzed the differences between where people are on their faith journey and what factors seems to distinguish these different segments of individuals.

Survey respondents were asked to self-identify their level of faith practice in one of four groupings. Given that the study focuses on those attending Mass, **only about 4-5%** of survey respondents indicate they are Catholic but do not practice. Another **26-28%** indicate that while they practice, they do not have a personal relationship with Jesus. Close to **35%** share they have had an encounter and are growing as a disciple, and the remaining third indicate that Jesus is the most important relationship in their life. CLI then used data science to identify any distinguishing characteristics between these phases.

For many parish leaders, the value of this framework lies in the ability to see the people in the pews differently and to design outreach, programming, and interactions to meet them. The goal is to help people move further along in their Catholic journey and grow deeper in their relationship with the Lord. Everyone's path is different, but statistically, there are things that seem to make the difference in accompanying people through different stages. For example:

- **To help those who may be Catholic but not practicing take the next step in their faith journey:**
  - Focus on building up the hospitality and welcome through ensuring different disciplines and practices in the parish like donuts and coffee after Mass or approaching those who look like visitors and greeting them.
  - Create opportunities for people to give witness to the importance of the Church in their lives, emphasizing the community of faith and how it supports them.
  - Novenas, feast days, or other devotionals that people may have grown up with or have cultural significance appear to be something that helps those who early in their Catholic journey.
- **To help those who may be practicing but haven't yet encountered the Lord:**
  - Personally invite them to participate in a small group or a formation experience that unpacks discipleship.
  - Break open the Scripture in preaching and through other opportunities, helping people to develop a more regular practice of lectio or reflection.
  - Model and teach different forms of prayer before, during, and after various ministry meetings or gatherings.
  - Consider offering and promoting a Hallow App subscription for the parish.

- **To help those who have had an encounter and are ready for more:**
  - Encourage them to find a regular confessor or, at minimum, avail themselves at least monthly to the Sacrament of Reconciliation.
  - Consider inviting a group to go through a more intensive experience to understand the teachings of the Church and how to lead others in small group faith sharing or Scripture study.
- **Instead of casting a wide net for one program, consider structuring activities and opportunities to meet each of these different stages where they are and help people take the next step.** By assessing one's parish calendar through the lens of these different segments, the parish can ensure they have a much more comprehensive approach to evangelization and formation.



3. Less than 50% of Weekly Mass-Going Catholics believe in the Church's teaching authority.

The Disciple Maker Index asks respondents to express the depth of their belief in six core beliefs, ranging from belief in salvation through Jesus Christ to the belief that Scripture is the Word of God. While most of these beliefs are deeply held by weekly Mass-goers, with percentages of those who strongly agree in the **70-90% range**, the beliefs that are consistently the lowest among respondents are those that speak to the Church's role in teaching the faith. Rarely in a surveyed parish do more than half or more of respondents say they strongly agree with the "teaching authority of the Church."

It is important to note that this result does not overly skew toward one particular demographic segment of those surveyed. The teachings of the Church are vast and all-encompassing. However, there are a few suggestions that can help deepen parishioners' belief in the Church's role in teaching us all how to live:

- **Always include "the why" as part of messaging**—whether it's an invitation to an event, a spiritual opportunity, a change in a practice or procedure, or a response to someone's question or challenge. Even older parishioners who have spent their whole lives serving the parish in some capacity may never have been told or know exactly *why* they do it.

- **Be mindful when talking about "the diocese."** While it's natural and even healthy for parish leaders to have disagreements or tensions with the diocesan central administration, it's important to be a "builder of communion" when speaking about the Church. Avoid complaining about issues in front of parishioners or simply blaming decisions on the diocese. While there may be truth to it, it can sabotage the overall credibility of the Church and her leaders.
- **Have some resources at the ready for FAQs.** It's hard to have a deep knowledge about everything the Church teaches, but as a parish leader, if you can connect fellow parishioners with credible resources and say, "this really helped me," that will be more productive than telling them what you know. While many of these types of resources are available with a simple internet search, having a specific resource referred by a trusted person, is always more effective.
- **Consider ensuring that your childhood religious education program has something for the parents as well.** Catholic Leadership Institute's whitepaper on Raising Disciples in an Apostolic Age is a great place to start and can be found by scanning the QR code on this page. Based on the DMI, more than two-thirds of parents say they believe raising their children in the faith is one of their most important responsibilities. However, only about 25% say they feel adequately equipped by the parish to do so. Presume that parents want to know about the faith and make sure to explain "the whys" of what you are teaching their children to them as well.

RESOURCES FOR MINISTRY

Raising Disciples in an Apostolic Age is more than a resource. It's a vision for the future of family faith formation and a practical guide to help dioceses and parishes respond to the realities families face today.

Download the whitepaper and access our entire Thought Leadership Library today.





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4. The Eucharist and Confession Go Hand-In-Hand

One of the more challenging insights from the Disciple Maker Index for individual pastors and communities to wrestle with has been the low level of participation of their people in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Nationally, and for close to a decade, the percentage of weekly Mass-going Catholics who indicate that they never go to Confession has hovered **around 33%**. In support of the National Eucharistic Revival, which began in 2022 through the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Catholic Leadership Institute dove into the beliefs and practices of its survey respondents in a different way—specifically through the lens of belief in the True Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist.



Among numerous correlations highlighted, one of the strongest was a tie between the depth of belief in the True Presence and a survey respondent's frequency of participation in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Respondents' likelihood to avail themselves of Confession at least monthly or quarterly more than doubled when they more deeply believed that Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist. In other words, while we can never prove causation, it appears as if we want to encourage others to believe and participate in the healing power of the sacrament of Confession, one of the best approaches is to help them believe more deeply in what is happening every time we go to Mass. In our partnering parishes where the belief in the Eucharist has deepened over time, they have employed several strategies, including:

- **Preaching** focused on deepening belief in the Eucharist and the connection between coming to communion and having been healed by Confession
- **Small groups** with a focus on belief in the True Presence
- **Formation** opportunities to explain parts of the Mass and why we worship as we do
- **Eucharistic Presence:** Increased opportunities and variety in schedule for Eucharistic Adoration and Confession, offered separately and together.

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5. Discipleship, Not Demographics, Drive Beliefs and Actions



One of the most surprising insights from the Disciple Maker Index is that demographics do not drive responses. In fact, for some of its most important questions, such as a parishioner's likelihood to recommend the parish, there seems to be no correlation with other characteristics you might imagine, such as the age of the parishioner or the length of their membership in the parish.

Often, an organization or community, especially a parish, can fall prey to subscribing to overly anecdotal insights from the loudest voices. Someone shares an experience that may be true, a data point that may be false, exaggerated, or limited to a small group, and it can end up driving reactions and decisions that affect a much larger community. It's in our human nature to project our own experiences or assumptions upon others. We say things like "Young people need to…" or "It's this group that is unhappy about…"

By gathering the voices of **over 1,000,000 Catholics** throughout the United States and Canada, Catholic Leadership Institute can help test parish leaders' hypotheses to see if their experience matches the larger picture. In many cases, these projections, while convenient narratives, don't necessarily play out in the data.



While some of these connections might exist in individual cases, we shouldn't assume the practices or beliefs of groups of people based simply on demographic information. What drives their responses more significantly is the depth of their relationship to the Church and the Lord. The blessing of the Disciple Maker Index is that we can look at both the national and local Church to ensure that we are not taking anything for granted. Some other ways to prevent unhelpful assumptions or test hypotheses before action include:

- **Make sure that surveys conducted by the parish have sufficient sample size from which to draw conclusions or inferences.** With small numbers of responses, do not use percentages to report but rather report that "4 out of 5 of the respondents" said something to keep perspective for those reading or hearing the information.
- **Consider hosting formal or informal focus groups based around certain target demographic groups with specific questions.** Try to craft the questions as intentionally as possible and invite people to speak from their own personal experience.
- **Gently challenge projections in meetings of staff and volunteers.** When someone uses a phrase like, "a lot of people think…" invite the person making the claim to speak with more specificity in order to make sure comments are put in proper context.

Final Thoughts

The Disciple Maker Index exists to provide a pastor and parish with a snapshot of where their worshipping community is, not because it will solve all their problems, but rather because it can help focus further questions and next steps.

These are just five of the countless insights that continue to emerge from this robust study of Catholic parish life. The Church is always blessed when we are committed to listening to the People of God and how ministry can best serve their needs. As the chorus of voices continues to grow as part of the Disciple Maker Index survey, Catholic Leadership Institute is excited to see how the Spirit of God continues to guide the Church through this effort.

All quantitative data shared in this document is from the Disciple Maker Index survey responses from around 1 million individuals collected in April 2026.