

Crisis of Faith? Even practicing Catholics say Church has done a poor job handling sexual abuse issue

Overall views on religion in Canada largely unchanged since 2015

May 28, 2019 – In the popular imagination, the story of the Catholic Church over the last two decades has been one of scandal, attempted reform, and further scandal. Decades of allegations of sexual abuse by clergy – combined with opaque policies for addressing them – have eroded public trust in the Church around the world.

A new public opinion poll from the non-profit Angus Reid Institute finds Canada is not immune to this trend. And yet, though most Canadians – including practicing Catholics – say the Church has done a poor job of handling this issue, the general public in this country seems to differentiate between the Church as an institution and people of faith more generally.

Scandal in the Catholic Church has not caused a broader crisis of faith in Canada today, though it has done notable damage to Canadian Catholics' opinions of their Church.

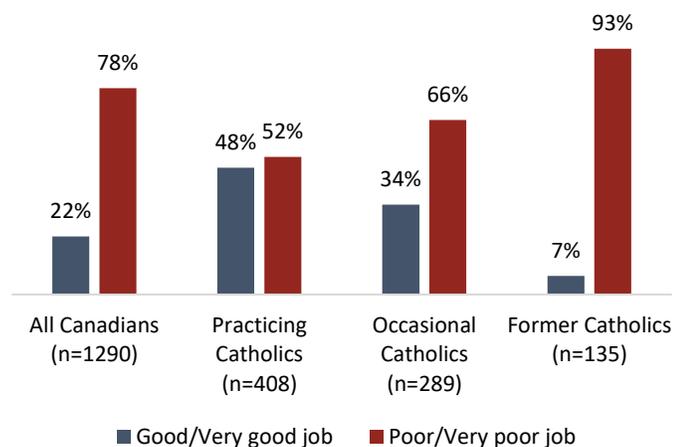
While some of this damage is almost certainly the result of concerns Canadians have about incidents of abuse that took place elsewhere in the world, it's notable that one-in-three practicing Catholics say their local Church community has had problems with clerical sexual abuse over the years.

Ultimately, this is an issue that the Catholic Church in Canada will need to effectively address and move on from if it hopes to recover. Most Canadians, and many practicing Catholics, say they expect the Church to emerge from this issue weakened as an institution.

More Key Findings:

- One change that some have suggested would help the Church recover is to put greater emphasis on lay involvement in Church operations. Most practicing Catholics (54%) say there is currently adequate room for such lay involvement, but some four-in-ten (40%) say there should be more

What kind of job do you think the Catholic Church as a whole has been doing in addressing this Catholic clerical sex abuse issue? (All respondents)



METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from May 9 – 16, 2019, among a representative randomized sample of 1,290 Canadian adults who are members of [Angus Reid Forum](#). The sample plan also included a booster sample of 321 practicing Catholics, for a total of 408 practicing Catholics overall. For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of 1,290 would carry a margin of error of +/- 2.7 percentage points; and a probability sample of 408 would carry a margin of error of +/- 4.9 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding. The survey was self-commissioned and paid for by ARI. [Detailed tables](#) are found at the end of this release.

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- Canadians hold net favourable views of adherents to eight of nine religious groups asked about in this survey, with only Muslims viewed negatively overall (17% positive, 39% negative). Moreover, views today are more positive, overall, than they were in 2015 for every group except Catholics (10 percentage points more negative), Protestants (down 3 points), and Buddhists (also down 3)
- Among Catholics who say their local Church community had a problem with clerical sexual abuse, nearly half (46%) say this issue was not adequately addressed
- Practicing Catholics are more likely than the general population to say the Church's efforts to address clerical sexual abuse have been "effective," (58% of practicing Catholics say this, compared to 23% of Canadians overall)

About ARI

*The **Angus Reid Institute (ARI)** was founded in October 2014 by pollster and sociologist, Dr. Angus Reid. ARI is a national, not-for-profit, non-partisan public opinion research foundation established to advance education by commissioning, conducting and disseminating to the public accessible and impartial statistical data, research and policy analysis on economics, political science, philanthropy, public administration, domestic and international affairs and other socio-economic issues of importance to Canada and its world.*

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- **Many see greater room for lay involvement**
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Part 1: Religion and Catholicism in Canada

Attitudes largely consistent over time

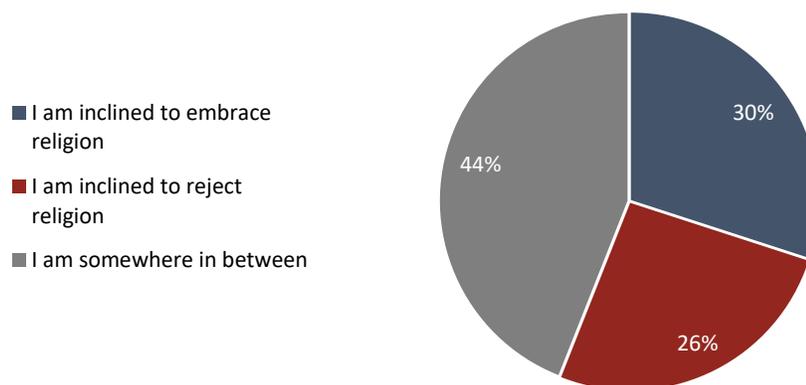
The bulk of this report deals with the Catholic Church and its response to sexual abuse allegations against some members of its priesthood. Before delving deeply into those issues, however, it's worth taking a look at the overall landscape of religion and faith in Canada, as well as Catholicism's place in that landscape.

The Angus Reid Institute has done lots of research on Canadians' religious beliefs and the role of faith in Canadian society in recent years.

At the personal level, Canadians' religious beliefs have remained quite consistent over that time. In [2015](#), ARI found 30 per cent of Canadians describing themselves as "inclined to embrace religion," 26 per cent saying they were "inclined to reject religion," and a plurality (44%) identifying themselves as "somewhere in between."

Today, responses to that same question are identical to what they were in 2015:

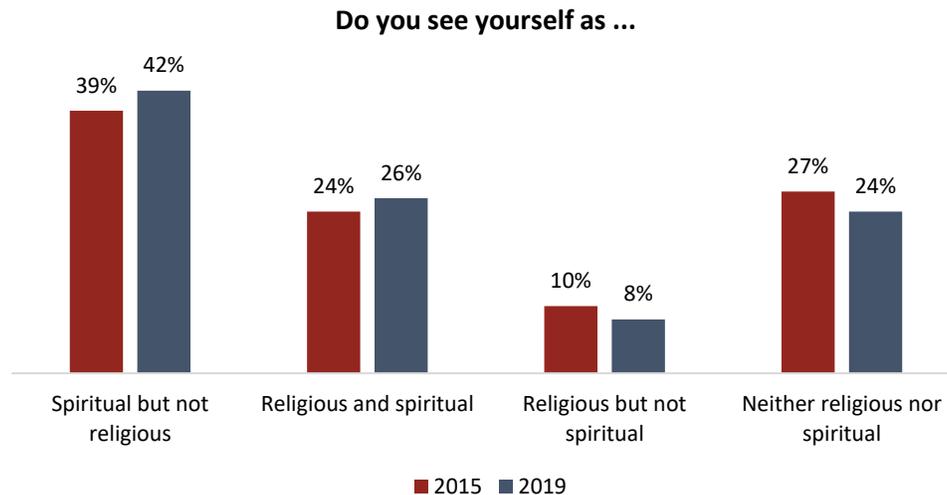
Where would you tend to locate yourself? (2019 responses)



Likewise, the percentage of people identifying as religions, spiritual, both, and neither has remained quite consistent over the last four years:

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There has been slightly more variation in Canadians' views of specific religious groups between 2015 and today. Looking at "net positivity" – the percentage of Canadians saying they have a positive view of each group minus the percentage who say they have a negative one – shows Canadians feeling more warmly in 2019 than they did in 2015 toward six of the nine faith groups asked about in this survey.

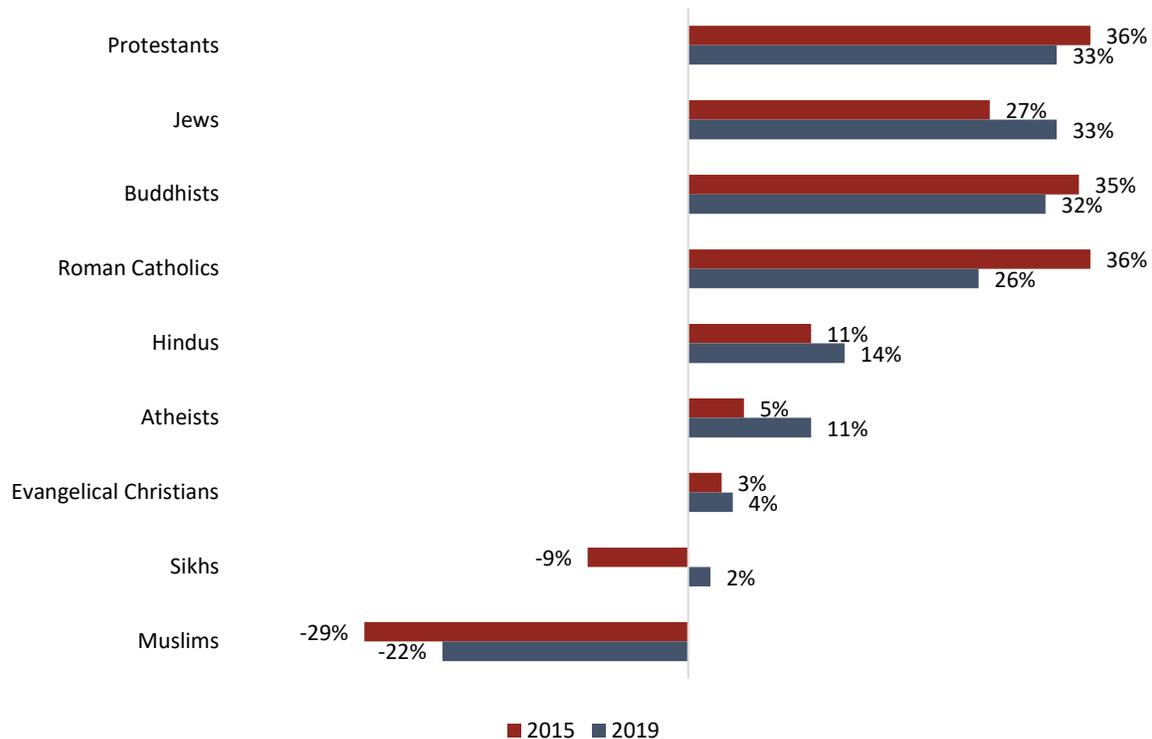
The three who are viewed more negatively today are Catholics (a net +26, down from +36 in 2015), Protestants (+33, down from +36), and Buddhists (+32, down from +35). That said, it's notable that each of these groups is consistently more likely to be viewed positively than negatively, overall.

Indeed, only one religious group – Muslims (-22, up from -29 in 2015) – has a net negative score overall. As seen in the graph that follows, net perceptions of Jews, Hindus, atheists, Evangelical Christians, and Sikhs are all more positive than negative, and have improved at least slightly since 2015.

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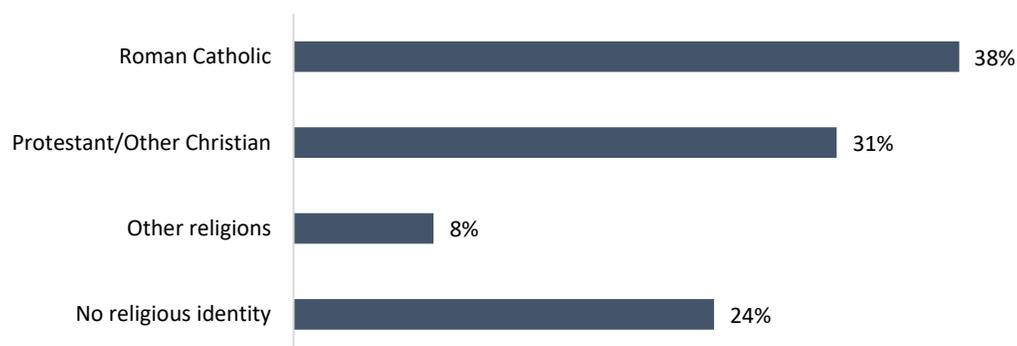
Net favourability of each group (percentage saying they have a 'positive' view of each minus percentage saying they have a 'negative' view)



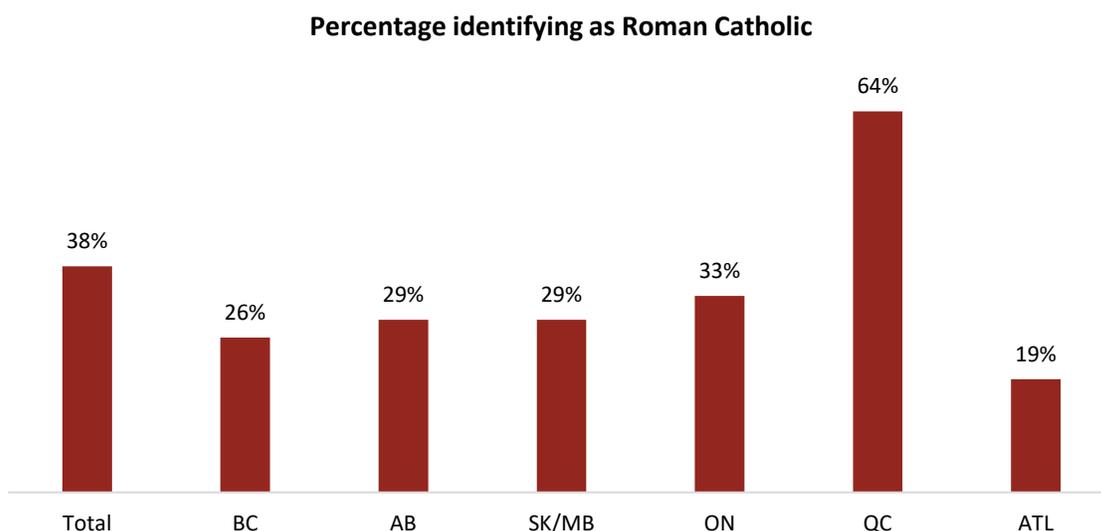
Catholics are Canada's largest religious group

The proportion of Canadians who identify as Roman Catholic outnumbers all other religious identities, as measured in the [most recent Statistics Canada data](#) available. More people in Canada identify their religion as "Catholic" than identify with all other Christian denominations combined:

Which one of the following best describes your religion?



Much of the size of the Roman Catholic faith in Canada can be attributed to Quebec, where nearly two-thirds (64%) identify themselves as Catholics. The proportion of Catholics doesn't rise above one-in-three in any other region, as seen in the following graph:



That said, though most Quebecers identify as Catholics, significantly fewer attend mass at least once a month. Those who do so are referred to in this report as “practicing Catholics,” and they represent about one-in-ten Canadians, both inside and outside Quebec.

Quebecers are more likely to be “occasional Catholics”: those who attend mass less often than once per month but still attend at least occasionally. Some 46 per cent of Quebec residents match this description, as do 22 per cent of Canadians, overall.

Quebec also has Canada’s largest share of “cultural Catholics”: those who profess to “never” attend mass but nevertheless identify themselves as Catholic. One-in-ten Quebecers (9%) and one-in-20 Canadians overall (5%) are “cultural Catholics.”

Two other groups round out the Canadian population’s relationship to Catholicism: Those who were never Catholic (52% of the population, but only 23% of Quebec residents), and those who were raised Catholic but no longer identify with the faith (10% of all Canadians).

The regional breakdown of these five groups is summarized in the table that follows.

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Canadians' personal experience with/relationship to Catholicism:							
(unweighted sample sizes)	Total (1290)	Region					
		BC (145)	AB (144)	SK/MB (155)	ON (423)	QC (318)	ATL (105)
Practicing Catholic	10%	12%	11%	9%	11%	9%	7%
Occasional Catholic	22%	9%	17%	17%	17%	46%	9%
Cultural Catholic	5%	5%	1%	3%	5%	9%	2%
Former Catholic	10%	8%	9%	13%	9%	13%	12%
Never Catholic	52%	66%	61%	58%	58%	23%	68%

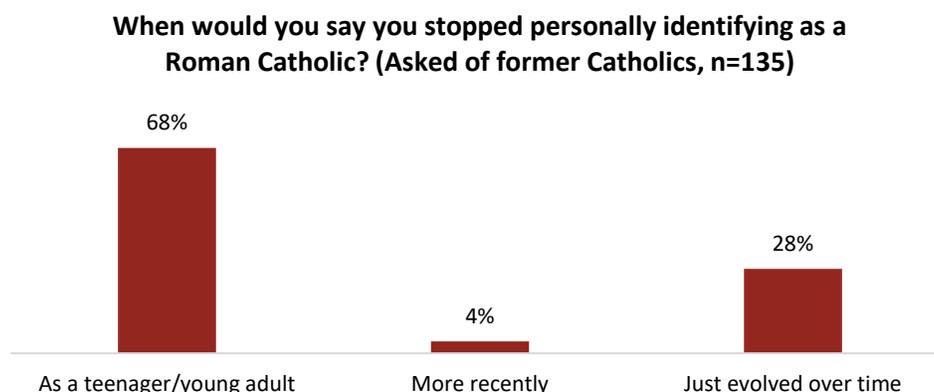
Who's leaving the Church, and why?

As shown in the preceding table, 10 per cent of Canadians are considered “former Catholics.” They were raised in the Catholic faith as children, but no longer consider themselves Roman Catholics in adulthood.

While one-in-ten Canadians is a significant number, representing more than three million people across the country, it's worth noting that the net percentage of Canadians who are Catholic has not declined by 10 percentage points.

Rather, four-in-ten respondents to this survey (41%) say they were raised Catholic as children, and 38 per cent of respondents currently identify as Catholic, suggesting that many Canadian former Catholics have been replaced by converts to the faith over the years.

Asked when they left the church, most former Catholics (68%) say it happened when they were teenagers or young adults, with hardly any saying it was a recent development in their lives:



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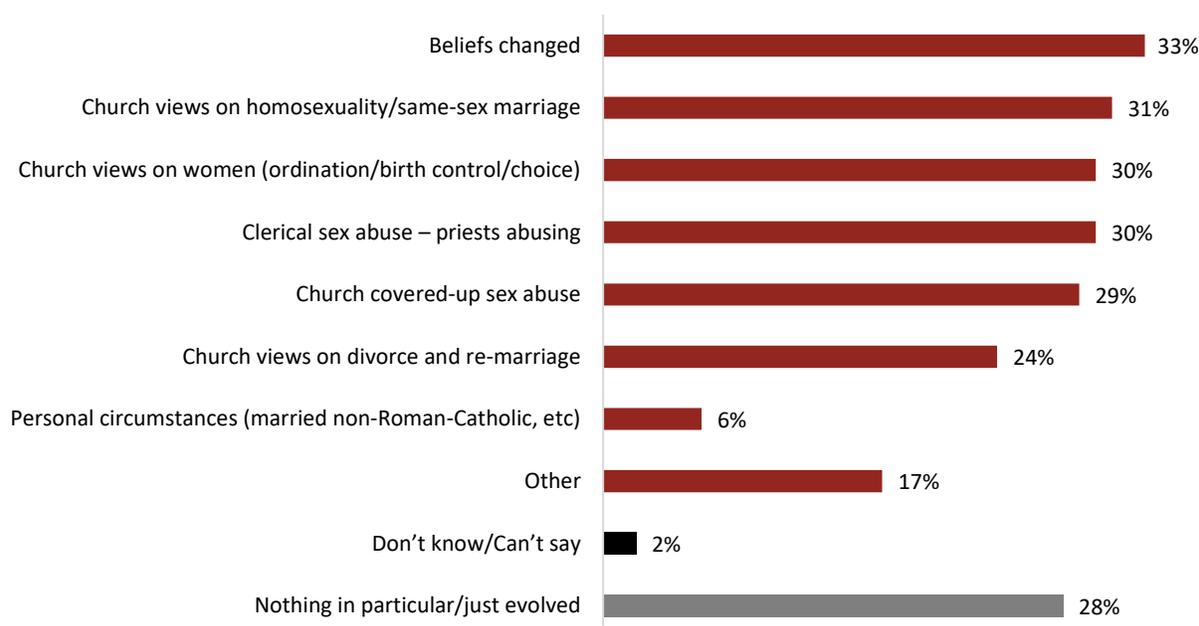
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As for *why* they left the church, former Catholics offer a variety of different reasons, with no single rationale informing the views of more than one-in-three.

The most common reasons cited include changing personal beliefs (33%), disillusionment over the sexual abuse scandal (30% cite the abuse itself, and 29% cite the coverup), and disagreement with church views on things like homosexuality (31%) and women’s issues (30%).

Notably, respondents were asked to choose all reasons that apply. It’s likely that many left the Church because of a combination of some or all of the factors listed in the graph that follows.

**Was there anything in particular that encouraged you to stop considering yourself a Roman Catholic?
(Choose all that apply, asked of former Catholics, n=135)**



Part 2: Proximity to the abuse problem

One-in-three see potential problems in their local Catholic community

Clerical sexual abuse in the Catholic Church is a global issue, with allegations of misconduct coming from [every inhabited continent](#) over the years and prompting apologies from [three successive Popes](#).

While the Canadian Catholic Church has not always been a focal point of the global scandal, it has had its share of priests [accused](#) – and [convicted](#) – of wrongdoing.

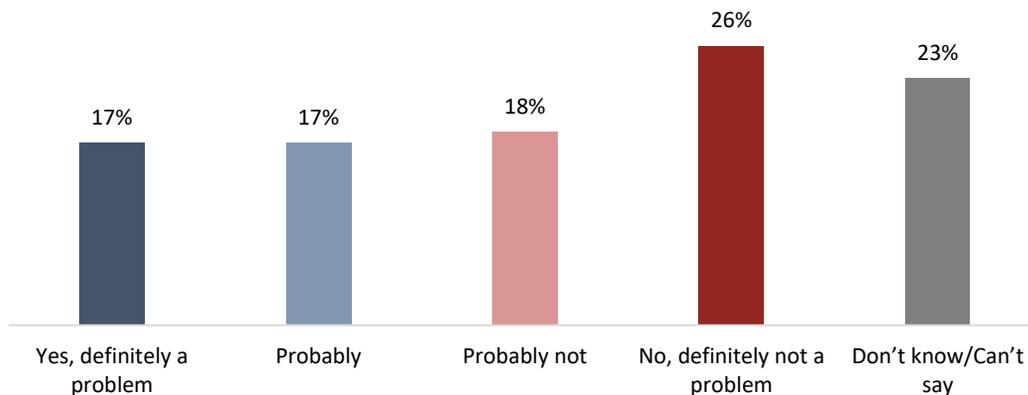
One-in-six practicing Catholics in Canada (17%) say there has definitely been a problem with clerical sexual abuse in their local Church community over the last several decades – going back to the 1970s – and another one-in-six (17%) say there has “probably” been such an issue.

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While this equates to one-in-three practicing Catholics who say there was definitely or probably a problem in their area, it's notable that many of the remaining two-in-three do not entirely rule out the possibility. As seen in the graph that follows, one-in-four (26%) say there was definitely not an abuse problem in their local Catholic community, but a similar number (23%) are unsure, and 18 per cent say this was "probably not" the case:

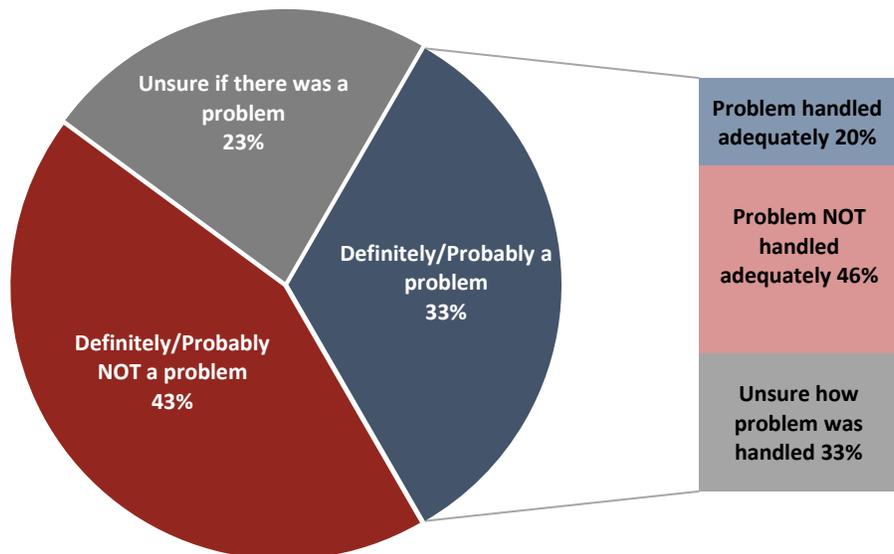
**In your own Catholic community, as far as you are aware, has there been a problem with clerical sexual abuse over the last few decades?
(among practicing Roman Catholics, n=408)**



The one-in-three practicing Catholics expressing certainty or suspicion that there was a problem with clerical sexual abuse in their local Catholic community were asked follow-up questions about how the issue was addressed.

A substantial number of them say they are unsure how the situation was resolved, but it's notable that more than twice as many say the problem in their church community was not handled adequately (46%) as say it was (20%).

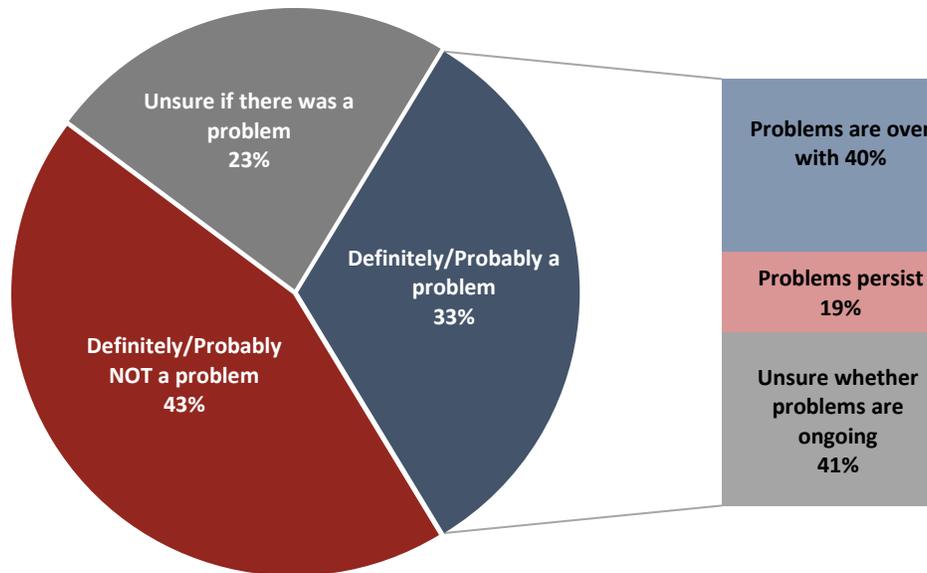
Over the last few decades (going back to the 1970s), as far as you are aware, has your own local Catholic community had a problem with clerical sexual abuse? And, if so, how was it handled? (among practicing Catholics, n=408)



One-in-five say problems persist

Troublingly, almost one-in-five (19%) practicing Catholics who have seen problems with clerical sexual abuse in their local Church communities over the years say these issues are ongoing. Larger numbers say the problems are over or are unsure, as seen in the following graph:

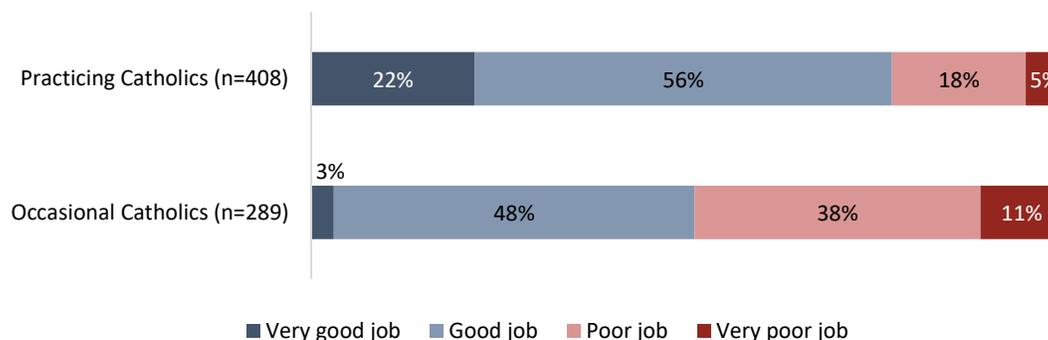
Over the last few decades (going back to the 1970s), as far as you are aware, has your own local Catholic community had a problem with clerical sexual abuse? And, if so, are these issues ongoing or over with?
(Among practicing Catholics, n=408)



Despite this uncertainty among those who have experienced an issue, most practicing Catholics say their local Church has done either a good or very good job of responding to the clerical sexual abuse problem overall.

They are not joined in this view by occasional Catholics, who are split overall, with hardly any of them rating their local Church's performance as "very good":

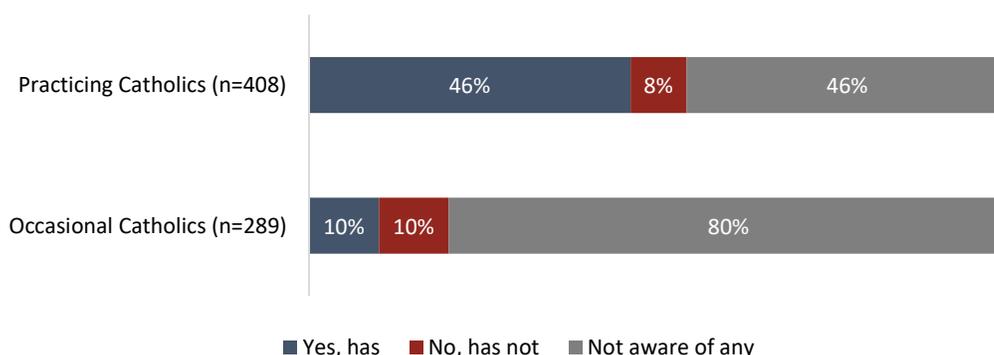
Overall, what kind of job would you say your local Catholic Church has done responding to this issue of clerical sexual abuse in the Church?



This divide may reflect a lack of awareness of local responses to the problem among occasional Catholics. Fully eight-in-ten among this group (80%) say they aren't aware of any local efforts to address the clerical sexual abuse issue.

Among practicing Catholics, this proportion is significantly smaller, and the proportion saying there have been active steps taken is more than four times as large:

Whether or not clerical sexual abuse was a problem in your own local Catholic community, has your local Church taken active concrete steps and policies to stop and prevent this problem?



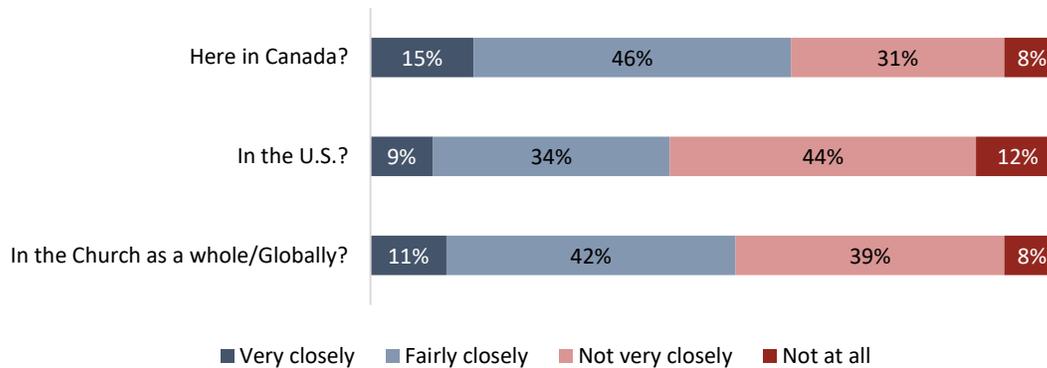
Part 3: Consequences

A uniquely Catholic problem?

As might be expected, given the years-long investigations, court proceedings, and Vatican task forces that have resulted from Catholic clerical sexual abuse scandals around the world over the years, Canadians tend to be quite aware of this issue.

Most Canadians (61%) say they've been following the issue of clerical sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in Canada either "very" or "fairly closely." That said, they are somewhat less likely be following the scandal in the U.S. or in the global church, as seen in the graph that follows.

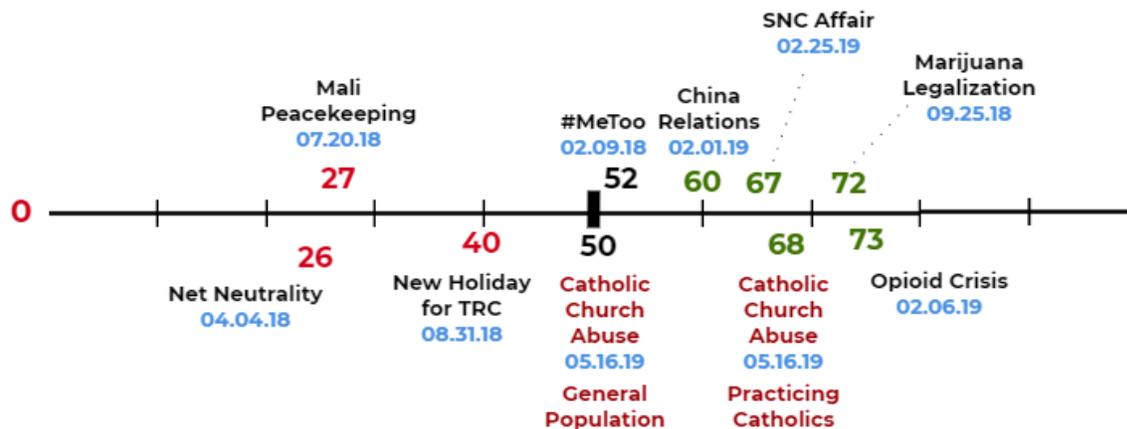
How closely have you yourself been following this issue of clerical sexual abuse in the Catholic Church ... (All respondents)



Awareness is especially high among practicing Catholics, more than eight-in-ten (81%) of whom say they are following the issue in Canada very or fairly closely. This includes more than twice as many who are following "very closely" as among the general population (36% versus 15%).

The overall level of awareness among the general population equates to a score of 50 on the ARI Engagement Index, which is the average. Among practicing Catholics, however, the score rises to 68, a number comparable to the amount of attention ARI recorded among all Canadians for the SNC-Lavalin scandal in February of this year (for greater detail on the ARI Engagement Index, see notes on methodology at the end of this release).

Scores on Angus Reid Institute Engagement Index



50 = generating an average level of engagement

Asked whether the problem of sexual abuse of teenagers and children is more or less common in the Catholic church, Canadians say it is more common by a wide margin (46% say it is more common, 3% say it is less so, and 51% say it's just as common).

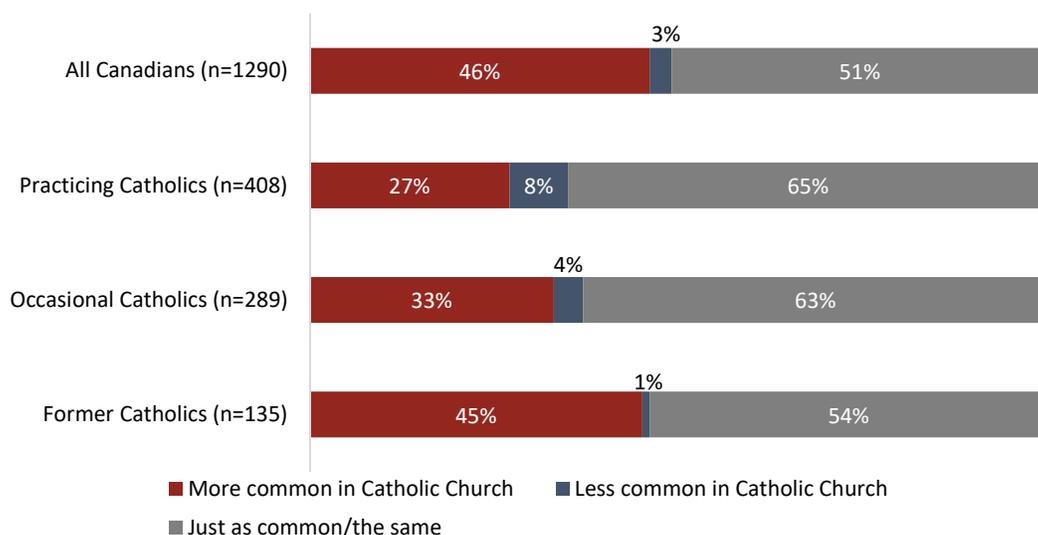
Practicing Catholics are more likely than the general population to say this issue is “just as common” in the Catholic Church as in other organizations (65% do), though fewer than one-in-ten (8%) say it is “less common.”

Occasional Catholics hold similar views on this question to those who attend church more regularly, while former Catholics are more aligned with the general population, as seen in the following graph:

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Would you say the problem of sexual abuse of teenagers and children is more common or less common in the Catholic Church, or is it just as common a problem in other religions?



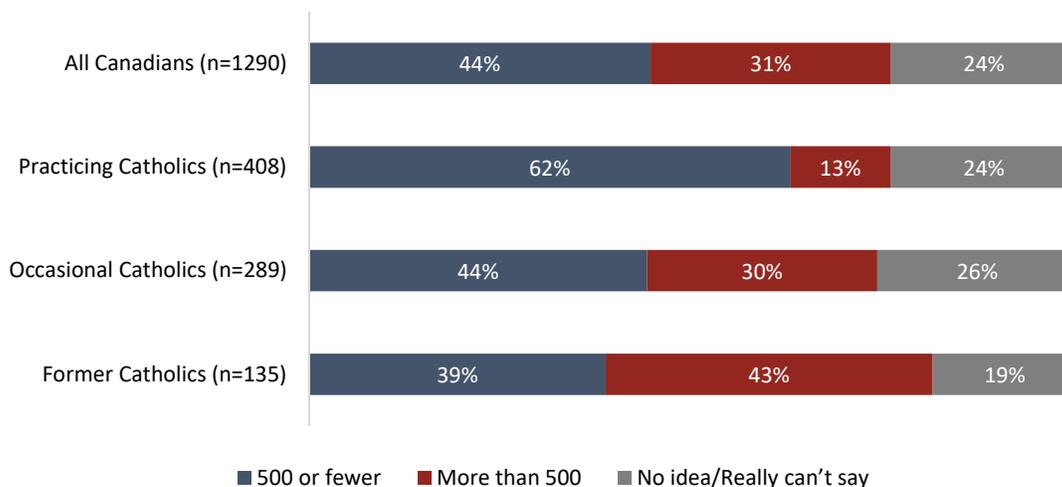
Perhaps reflecting these views, former Catholics are more likely than practicing and occasional ones to estimate the number of Canadian priests who committed abuse at more than 500 (a figure which would represent roughly 7 per cent of the approximately 7,000 Catholic priests in Canada).

For comparison, Australia's Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sex Abuse concluded that 7 per cent of Catholic priests who worked in that country between 1950 and 2009 had been accused of sexually abusing children.

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If you had to make an estimate, roughly how many of the 7,000 Catholic priests in Canada do you think have committed sexual abuse involving children or teenagers?

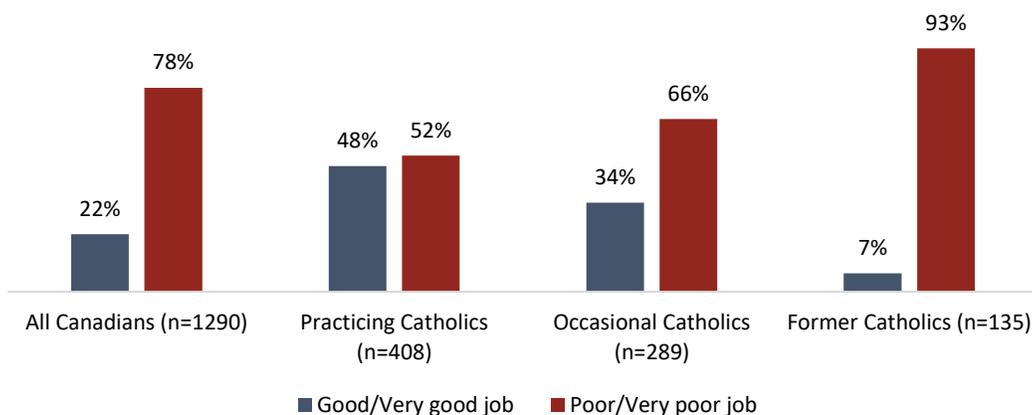


Most say the Church has done a poor job responding to abuse

More than three-in-four Canadians (78%) say the Catholic Church as a whole has done a poor job of addressing this issue of clerical sexual abuse.

This figure includes more than half of practicing Catholics (52%), as well as two-thirds of those who attend Church occasionally, as seen in the following graph:

What kind of job do you think the Catholic Church as a whole has been doing in addressing this Catholic clerical sex abuse issue? (All respondents)

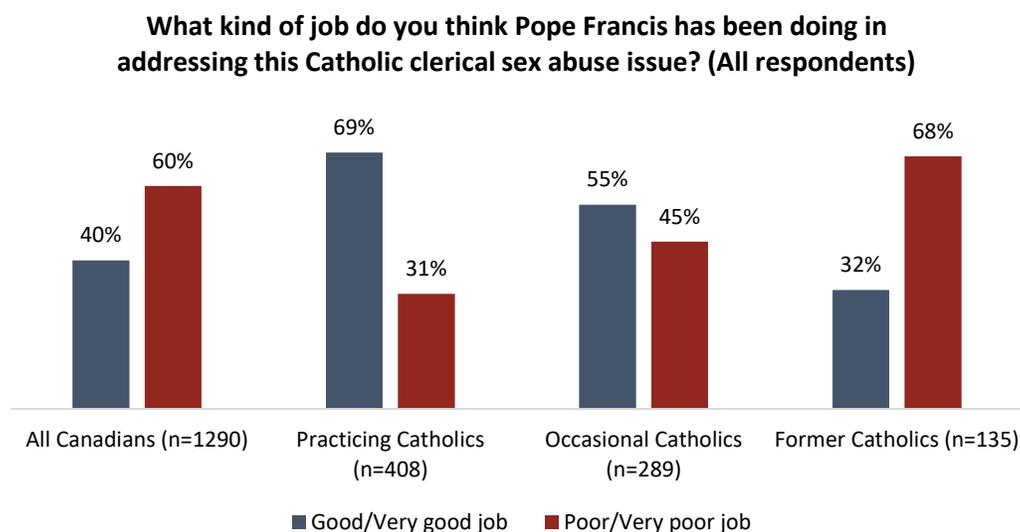


While the Church as a whole is viewed as having handled this issue poorly, Canadians are more mixed in their assessment of Pope Francis on this file.

Clerical sexual abuse was an issue for the Catholic Church long before Francis became Pope, but the Argentine's response to the issue since becoming the leader of the Church has been both [praised](#) and [criticized](#). Supporters point out that Francis has taken unprecedented steps to address clerical abuse, including summoning the presidents of the world's conferences of bishops to Rome for a summit on the issue, while critics argue that the Pope's efforts have not included enough concrete actions to help victims and prevent future incidents.

Overall, Canadians are more likely to say Francis has done a poor job than a good one, though by a narrower margin than they say this of the Church as a whole.

Driving this division are the views of Catholics themselves, most of whom see the pontiff's handling of the issue as good or very good. That said, it's worth noting that a sizeable minority of practicing Catholics (31%) and an even larger number of occasional Catholics (45%) are less than satisfied with Francis on this issue:



Separate from the question of whether the Church is doing a good or a bad job is a related question about whether its efforts have been effective. On this question, skepticism reigns.

Asked to consider only the Church's response here in Canada, respondents are twice as likely to say the Church's efforts have been ineffective at addressing this issue (54% say this) as they are to say such efforts have been effective (27%). The rest (19%) are unsure.

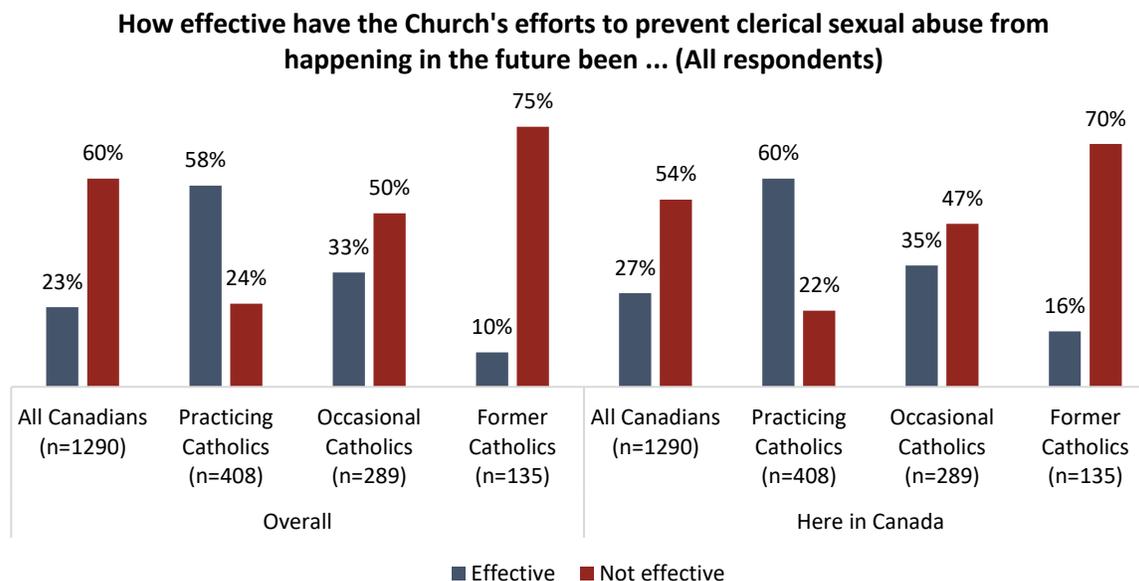
Likewise, when asked about the Church's response to clerical sexual abuse overall, Canadians are nearly three times more likely to say these efforts have been ineffective (60%) than effective (23%), with 17 per cent uncertain.

On these questions about effectiveness, the divide between practicing Catholics and those who attend Church less often widens. Most practicing Catholics believe the Church's efforts have been getting

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results, both in Canada and globally. Occasional Catholics are much less certain, as seen in the graph that follows.



Many Catholics say the Church is 'still covering things up'

These findings lead toward a more fundamental question about the overall approach the Catholic Church is taking to the sexual abuse scandal. Is the Church engaged in a cover-up, as it was for most of the 20th century? Or has it embraced transparency?

For half of Canadians (50%), the answer lies somewhere in between. They say the church is “being more open, but still guarded” in its approach to this situation.

The rest of the population is six times more likely to say the Church is “still covering things up” (44% say this) than to say it is “being as open and up-front as possible” (7%).

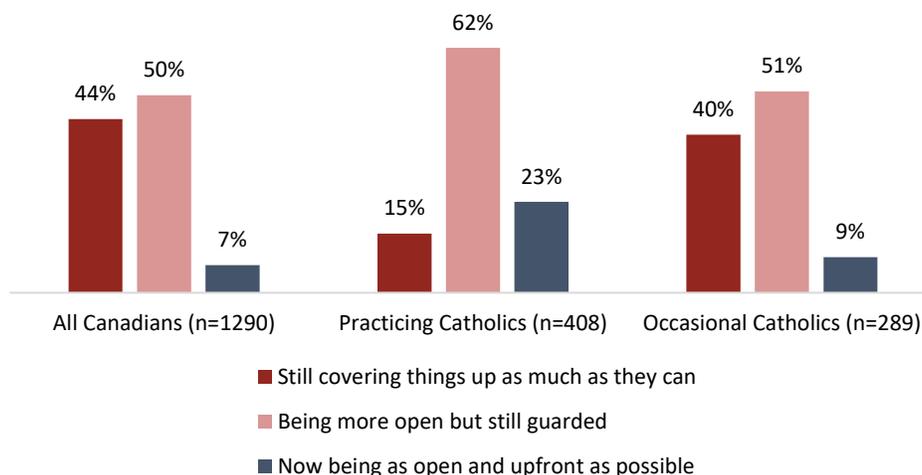
Even among practicing Catholics, almost one-in-six (15%) say the church is still covering things up as much as it can, and fewer than one-in-four (23%) say it is being as transparent as possible, with a majority (62%) landing somewhere in the middle.

Among occasional Catholics, fully four-in-ten (40%) say the church is still covering things up, compared to fewer than one-in-ten (9%) who say it is being open and up-front:

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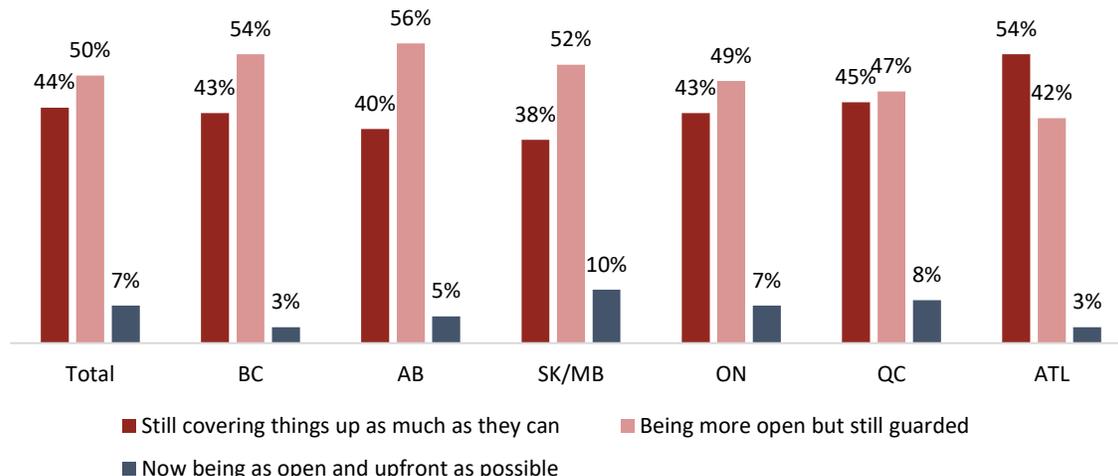
Do you think the Catholic Church today is ... (All respondents)



This question also produces some notable splits along demographic lines, making it one of the few in this study to do so.

The view that the Church is still covering things up as much as possible is strongest in Atlantic Canada, where 54 per cent feel this way. In every other region, larger numbers choose the middle option on this question:

Do you think the Catholic Church today is ... (All respondents)



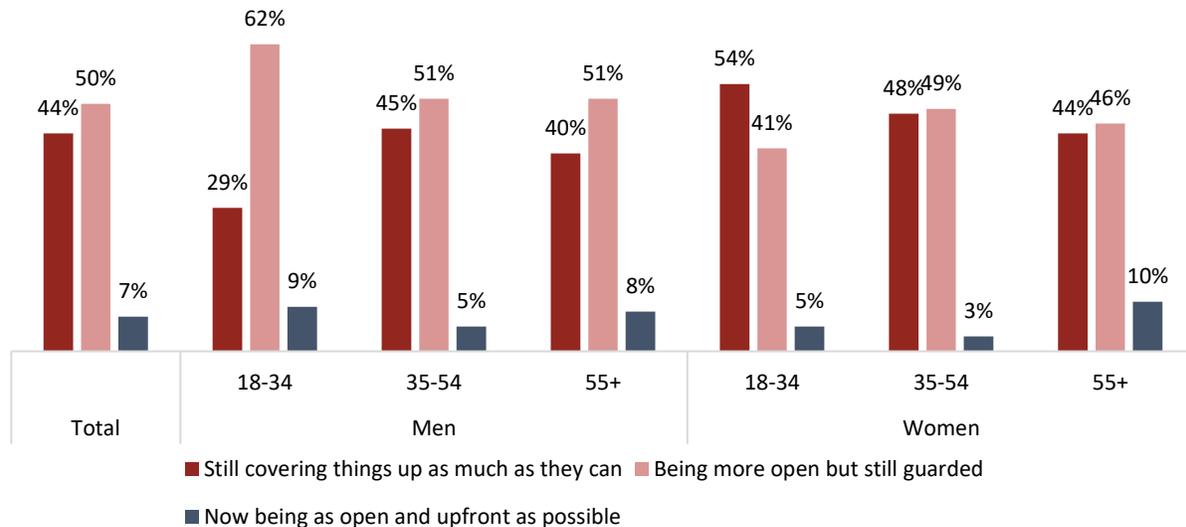
Similarly, there is significant disagreement on this question between age and gender groups, with men under age 35 overwhelmingly seeing the church as being “more open” (62% say this), while a majority of women their age (54%) see the church “still covering things up as much as possible.”

In other age groups, men and women are more in sync in their views:

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Do you think the Catholic Church today is ... (All respondents)



Scandal weakens Catholics’ opinions of their Church

The sexual abuse scandal has weakened perceptions of the Catholic Church in the United States and around the world, and this survey finds that Canada is no exception.

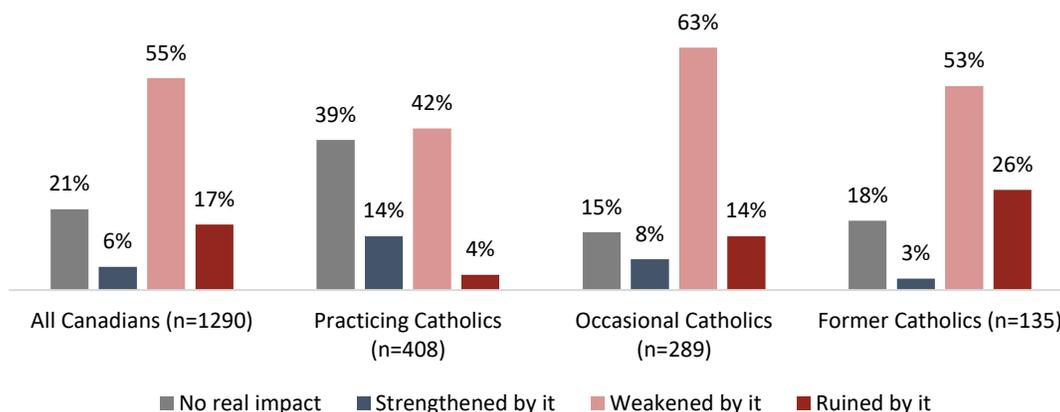
Most Canadians (55%) say their opinion of the Catholic Church has been weakened by the clerical sexual abuse problem.

That said, while the general population’s opinion of a religious group is certainly notable, it is the opinions of the faithful that have the greatest bearing on the future of the group itself.

With that in mind, it’s notable 42 per cent of practicing Catholics say their opinion of the church has been weakened by this scandal. Among occasional Catholics, an even greater number (63%) say this, and one-in-seven (14%) say their opinion of the church has been “ruined.”

Among former Catholics, fully one-in-four (26%) say the scandal has ruined their opinion of the church. This number roughly corresponds to the three-in-ten former Catholics who say clerical sexual abuse and the church’s response to it were their reasons for leaving the church:

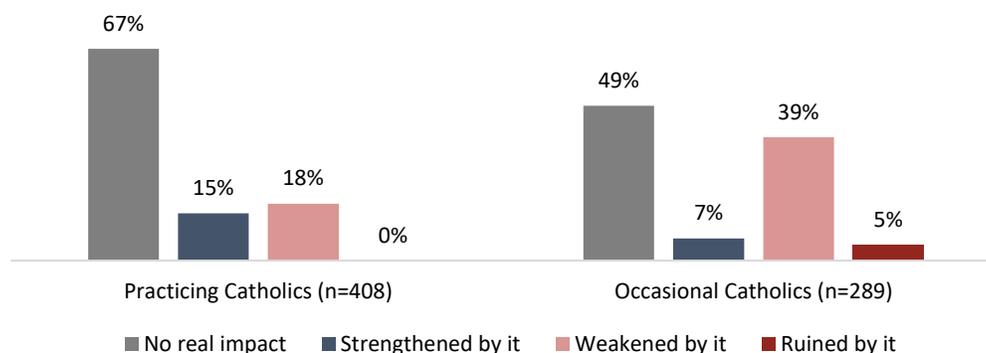
What kind of an impact, if any, has this clerical sexual abuse issue and the Church's response to it had on your opinion of the Catholic Church overall? (All respondents)



One-in-five say their personal faith has been weakened

In a similar vein, almost one-in-five practicing Catholics (18%) say their personal faith has been weakened by this issue and the church's response to it. This is true of an even greater proportion of occasional Catholics:

What kind of an impact, if any, has this clerical sexual abuse issue and the Church's response to it had on your own personal faith and spirituality? (All respondents)

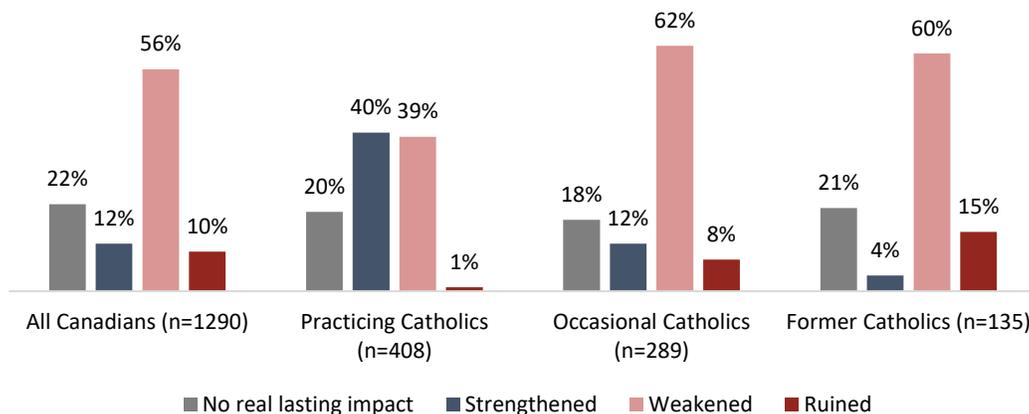


Asked how they think the Church will emerge from this scandal, most Canadians tend to believe it will be weakened (56% do). Among practicing Catholics, divisions remain over whether the church will emerge weakened or strengthened by the controversy:

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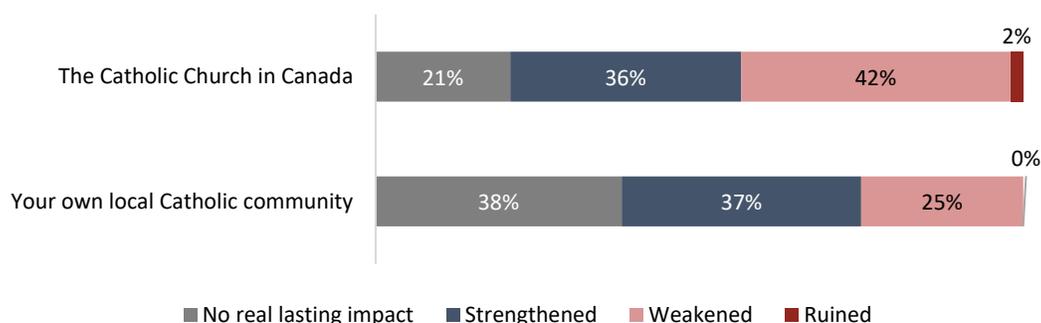
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How do you think the Catholic Church will emerge from this whole clerical sexual abuse issue? (All respondents)



Practicing Catholics are similarly divided on how the Catholic Church in Canada will emerge, though most expect their own Catholic communities to either be strengthened or unaffected:

How do you think each of the following will emerge from this whole clerical sexual abuse issue? (Responses from practicing Catholics, n=408)



Part 4: Clergy or Laity?

Many see greater room for lay involvement

Though this study focused more on assessing the scope of the problem of clerical sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in Canada than on testing potential remedies for it, one proposal merits discussion here.

Many Catholics, including – arguably – Pope Francis himself, see a key cause of the problem in the rise of “clericalism,” a term that refers to the primacy of ordained people in the management structure of the Church. Recent articles in *The Atlantic* have argued for (and against) the abolition of the priesthood as a solution to the problems facing the Catholic Church.

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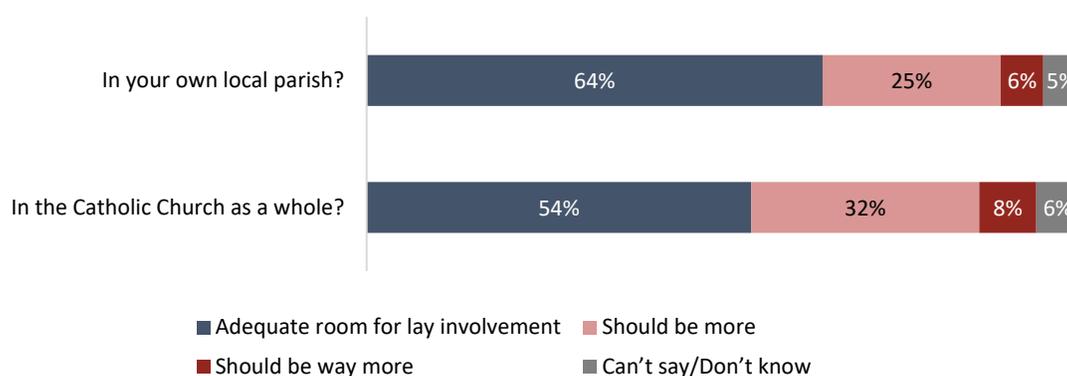
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The idea – whether or not it goes as far as ending the priesthood – is that the Catholic Church would be better served by a decrease in clericalism and an increase in lay people taking a greater role in its administration.

While this survey did not ask about the abolition of clergy, it did ask Catholics whether they see adequate room in their local Church communities – and in the Church as a whole – for non-ordained people to get involved.

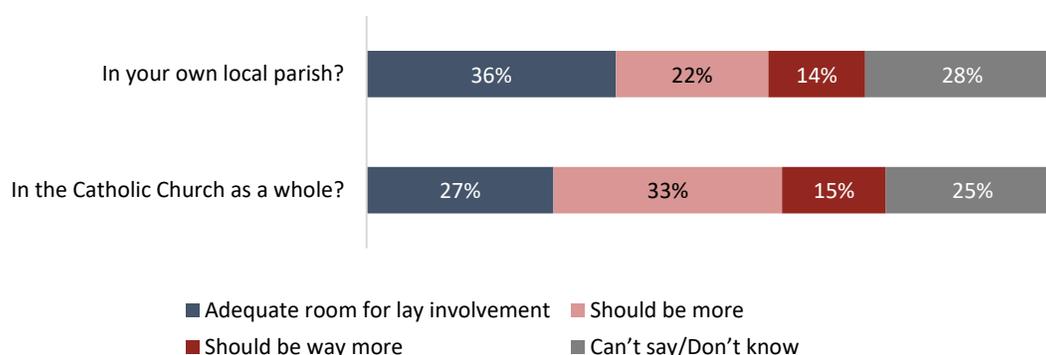
Most practicing Catholics tend to say the current amount of lay involvement at each level is sufficient, though sizeable minorities say there should be more:

**Would you say there is adequate room for lay people to be involved ...
(Among practicing Catholics, n=408)**



Among occasional Catholics, the desire for greater lay involvement is noticeably higher, particularly in terms of the number of people who say there should be “way more” room for such participation.

**Would you say there is adequate room for lay people to be involved ...
(Among occasional Catholics, n=289)**



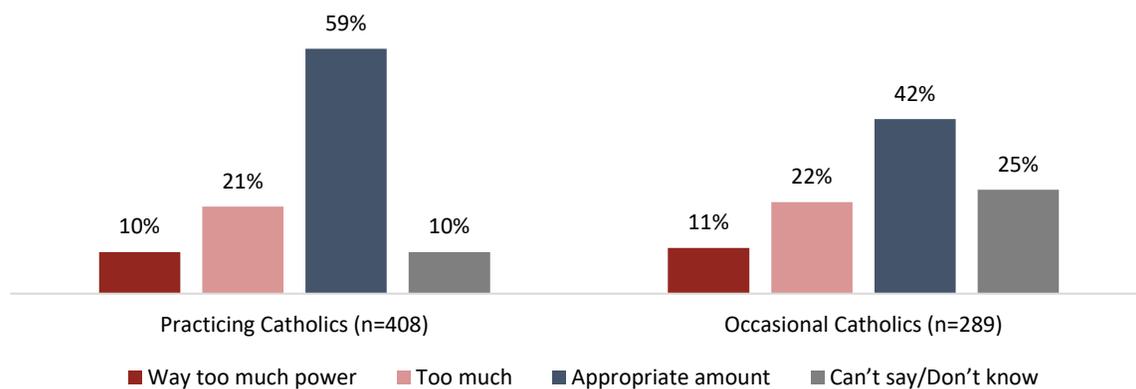
The greater desire for lay involvement among those who attend Church less often is, perhaps, counterintuitive. It could suggest that occasional Catholics – by virtue of spending less time in their local

parishes – are not fully aware of the opportunities for non-ordained people to get involved in the life of the Church.

Alternatively, it could suggest that occasional Catholics are turned off by the amount of power held by the clergy; and would be more inclined to participate – and to attend Church more regularly – if they felt they had a greater say in parish operations.

This survey also asked whether Catholic priests have too much power in the Church as a whole. Most practicing and occasional Catholics say the clergy has an appropriate amount of power, though notable minorities again feel differently:

Thinking about Catholic priests, would you say they generally have too much power and control over things or the appropriate amount in the Catholic Church as a whole? (Asked of practicing and occasional Catholics only)



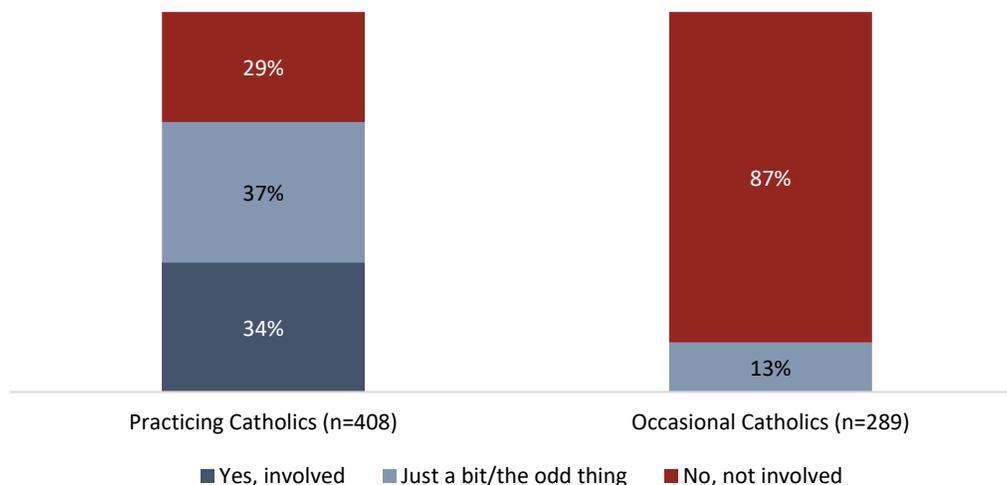
One-in-three are currently involved in parish activities

If a decrease in clericalism and an increase in lay participation is going to be part of the way forward for the Catholic Church, ordinary Catholics will need to take a larger role in the day-to-day operation of their local parishes.

Currently, roughly one-in-three practicing Catholics (34%) say they are personally involved in parish activities, with a slightly larger number (37%) saying they participate “just a bit.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, occasional Catholics are less likely to profess even a small amount of involvement in their local Churches:

**Are you personally involved in any parish activities?
(Asked of practicing and occasional Catholics only)**



Notes on Methodology:

Since early 2015, the Angus Reid Institute has been asking Canadians a standardized question about how closely they are following the topics of ARI polls. To facilitate easy comparisons across disparate topics, ARI researchers have developed an Engagement Index based on respondents' answers.

For each issue, respondents are asked to say whether they are "following it in the news and discussing it with friends and family," "seeing some media coverage and having the odd conversation," "just scanning the headlines," or not seeing or hearing anything about the issue.

The index is based on the average response to this question over the years, with greater weight given to the highest level of engagement on the scale, and lesser weight given to the "having the odd conversation" and "just scanning headlines" responses. An "average" issue scores a 50 on the index, with scores higher than 50 representing above-average engagement and scores lower than 50 representing below-average engagement.

On this particular topic of clerical sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, the response scale was modified to explicitly ask respondents how closely they are following the issue. One-in-ten (11%) say they are following it "very closely." Another 42 per cent are following it "fairly closely." Four-in-ten (42%) are not following the issue very closely, and the rest (8%) are not following it all.

Overall responses on this topic equate to a score of 50 on the ARI Engagement Index, which indicates exactly "average" engagement, higher than issues like Canada's involvement in the 2018 Mali peacekeeping mission (engagement score of 27) and net neutrality laws (26) but lower than the #MeToo movement (52) and China-Canada relations (60).

However, among practicing Catholics, there is much higher engagement on the issue of clerical sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. With an engagement score of 68, this group's level of attention to the issue is comparable to that of the general Canadian public at the height of the SNC-Lavalin affair this past February (67).

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For detailed results by age, gender, region, education, and other demographics, click [here](#).

For detailed results among practicing, occasional, and former Catholics, click [here](#).

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