

Catholics in the U.S. Religion Census

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US Religion Census

For more than a century, the Catholic Church has been the single-largest religious body in the United States. Its number of adherents, more than 60 million, accounts for roughly 20 percent of the U.S. population and nearly 40 percent of adherents in the U.S. Religion Census. In 2020, it had nearly 20,000 U.S. congregations—the fourth-most of all religious bodies in the Religion Census. It was also present in nearly 3,000 counties—the second-most number of counties of all religious bodies in the Religion Census.

This presentation gives a brief overview of Catholics in the U.S. Religion Census. It discusses what the Religion Census counted for the Catholic Church, how the Religion Census number of Catholic adherents compares to other sources, the specific Religion Census procedures for deriving a Catholic count, how the presence of the Catholic Church varies across the nation, and some indicators about Catholic congregations evident in the Religion Census data.

Characteristics of Catholic Count

- Includes both Latin and Eastern dioceses
- “Congregations” or churches are parish, mission, or other sites with regularly scheduled Sunday mass that draw a congregation from the public at least six months of the year
 - This allows comparability between counties with limited Catholic presence and those with hundreds of Catholic churches
 - We identified 19,405 Catholic congregations
 - This was the smallest number the Religion Census has found in more than 50 years, reflecting consolidation within church
 - U.S. Catholic Church presence is as extensive as ever: 2,961 (of 3,143) counties (or equivalents)
- “Adherents” are the number of individuals associated with a Catholic church in some way—but measurements vary

The Religion Census count of the Catholic Church includes both Eastern (e.g., Armenian, Byzantine, Chaldean, Maronite, Melkite, Romanian, Syro-Malabar, Syro-Malankara, Ukrainian) and the more numerous Latin dioceses. The Religion Census has traditionally counted these churches together given that they are in communion with each other.

Catholic congregations in the Religion Census are parish churches, mission churches, or other sites with regularly scheduled Sunday mass that draws a congregation from the public at least six months of the year. For example, a parish church in one county that has a mission church in another would represent two Catholic congregations in two counties. Similarly, a consolidated parish maintaining two worship sites at two churches is counted as two congregations. This allows comparability between counties with limited Catholic presence, such as a county with one mission congregation, and a county with hundreds of Catholic churches.

Altogether, we identified 19,405 Catholic congregations. This was the smallest number the Religion Census has found in more than 50 years, reflecting consolidation within the Church. At the same time, the U.S. presence of the Catholic Church is as extensive as ever, including 2,961 of 3,143 counties (or equivalents such as civil parishes in Louisiana and independent cities in Virginia).

The other Religion Census data element is “adherents,” i.e., the number of individuals associated with a Catholic church in some way. Measurements for “adherents” vary, which required the Religion Census to use a variety of methods to identify them.

How Many Catholics? Who's Asking?

Source	% of U.S. population	Number of Catholics
NORC-GSS—total (2018)	23.1	76,600,000
Nationscape (2019-20)	22.4	74,200,000
<i>The Official Catholic Directory</i> (2020)	20.4	67,635,546
NORC-GSS—"ever" attend (2018)	19.1	63,300,000
U.S. Religion Census (2020)	18.7	61,858,137

Estimates of the total Catholic population vary widely. At the high end, the National Opinion Research Center General Social Survey (NORC-GSS) for 2018, the last NORC-GSS conducted before the Religion Census of 2020, indicated that 23.1 percent of the U.S. population is Catholic. Multiplying that percentage by the Census 2020 population (331,449,281) indicates a Catholic population of nearly 77 million. Next is an estimate derived from the Nationscape survey of 2019 and 2020. Multiplying the 22.3 percent Catholic in that survey by the total population yields a Catholic population of more than 74 million.

Diocesan totals tabulated from *The Official Catholic Directory* for 2020 indicate there were 67,635,546 Catholics in the United States that year. Dividing that total by the Census 2020 population indicates a Catholic population of 20.4 percent. There are, however, some problems with *The Official Catholic Directory* count.

Dioceses are inconsistent in their reporting to the 2020 directory. Some dioceses, for example, appear to guess a population percentage and apply that to their assumption of the total population—and are often wrong both in the population percentage they guess and the total population they assume. Others use registration statistics, but these understate the total Catholic population, especially in rapidly growing areas. Still other dioceses report identical totals for several consecutive years, regardless of other population change in their area.

The Official Catholic Directory count appears to overstate how many Catholics "ever" attend mass. The NORC-GSS, for example, indicates that 19.1 percent of the population both identifies as "Catholic" and reports attending religious services more frequently than "never." Multiplied by the total population, this indicates an "ever"-attending Catholic population that is several million fewer than what *The Official Catholic Directory* indicates.

The Code of Canon Law for the Catholic Church does not define membership per se. It does imply that individuals who are baptized by the Catholic Church and who have not formally repudiated the faith are to be considered Catholic. In the spirit of that guidance, as well as the goals of the U.S. Religion Census, we sought to include as Catholic “adherents” baptized Catholic individuals known to each Catholic congregation. As we discuss next, we derived such a number for each diocese. The sum of the diocesan totals was 61,858,137, a number equivalent to 18.7 percent of the Census 2020 population.

So, How Many Catholics in My Diocese?

- We sought from each diocese numbers by parish or mission on
 - Households
 - Individuals
 - Infant baptisms
 - Deaths
 - Attendance
- We received data from every diocese, but quality and completeness varied
- We therefore used several data sources to identify the likely total number of Catholics in each diocese and their distribution
 - Diocesan data, including count in *The Official Catholic Directory*
 - Survey statistics where available, particularly a special Pew file made available to us
 - Vital and sacramental statistics

To discern the number of Catholics in each diocese and their distribution by county, we asked each diocese to provide, by parish or mission, their number of households, individuals, infant baptisms in the preceding year, deaths in the preceding year, and weekly attendance. Given the difficulties of collecting this data during the COVID-19 pandemic, we also encouraged dioceses to provide this data for 2019 if they believed that to be more accessible or indicative of their true number of Catholics.

Some dioceses reported complete data whose totals approximated that of other sources, while some reported only household data requiring further estimation. More than one diocesan official told us the question they dread most is how many Catholics they have, because the answer can vary for different reasons.

We therefore used several data sources to identify the likely total number of Catholics in each diocese and their distribution. In addition to the data we requested and diocesan totals published in *The Official Catholic Directory*, these included survey statistics (particularly a special Pew Religious Landscape file made available to us) as well as local area vital statistics to compare with Catholic infant baptism and death totals.

Catholic Researchers Reached Consensus on Totals and Distribution for Each Diocese

- Glenmary Research Center
 - Clifford Grammich
 - Lucy Putnam
- Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University
 - Mary Gautier
 - Michal Kramarek
- Diocese of Rockford
 - Michael Cieslak, Director of Research and Planning (retired)

From the data sources noted above, a committee of researchers, listed above, familiar with Catholic demographic issues estimated the likely total number of Catholics within a diocese. Where it could be discerned, we focused on the proportion of the population that claimed to be both (1) Catholic and (2) to attend religious services more frequently than “never.” This, committee members believed, would be equivalent to the number of individuals known to a Catholic congregation in some way.

Once we reached consensus on a diocesan total and county-level distribution, we asked dioceses for follow-up comment and adjusted data further if necessary.

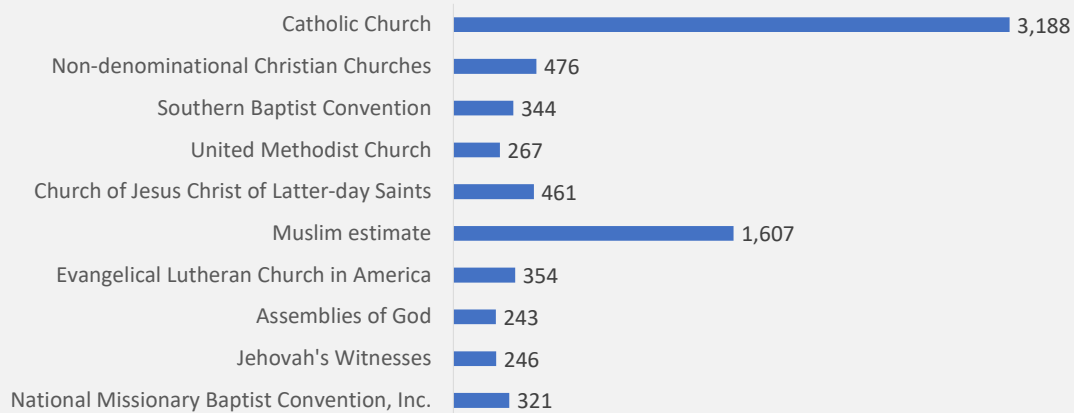
The Catholic Church Is the Single-Largest Religious Body in the 2020 U.S. Religion Census

Body	Congregations	Adherents	Counties
Catholic Church	19,405	61,858,137	2,961
Non-denominational Christian Churches	44,319	21,095,641	2,753
Southern Baptist Convention	51,379	17,649,040	2,677
United Methodist Church	30,051	8,018,629	2,989
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints	14,567	6,721,031	1,918
Muslim Estimate	2,771	4,453,908	670
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	8,857	3,139,413	1,698
Assemblies of God	12,739	3,094,547	2,510
Jehovah's Witnesses	12,285	3,016,924	2,166
National Missionary Baptist Convention, Inc.	7,564	2,428,820	1,285

Our final totals for the Catholic Church, as indicated, were 19,405 congregations with 61,858,137 adherents in 2,961 counties. This marked the Catholic Church as the single-largest religious body in the Religion Census, with about three times the number of adherents of the next closest group.

The above table shows the U.S. Catholic Church with the top ten bodies in the 2020 Religion Census, all with at least two million adherents. The number of congregations for these bodies ranged from fewer than 3,000 for our Muslim estimate to more than 50,000 for the Southern Baptist Convention. The Catholic Church had the fourth-most congregations, but fewer than half what the Southern Baptist Convention and non-denominational Christian churches had. The number of counties in which each body was present ranged from fewer than 700 for our Muslim estimate to nearly 3,000 for the United Methodist Church. The Catholic Church was second in number of counties, trailing the United Methodist church by 28.

Catholics Have the Highest Number of Adherents per Congregation



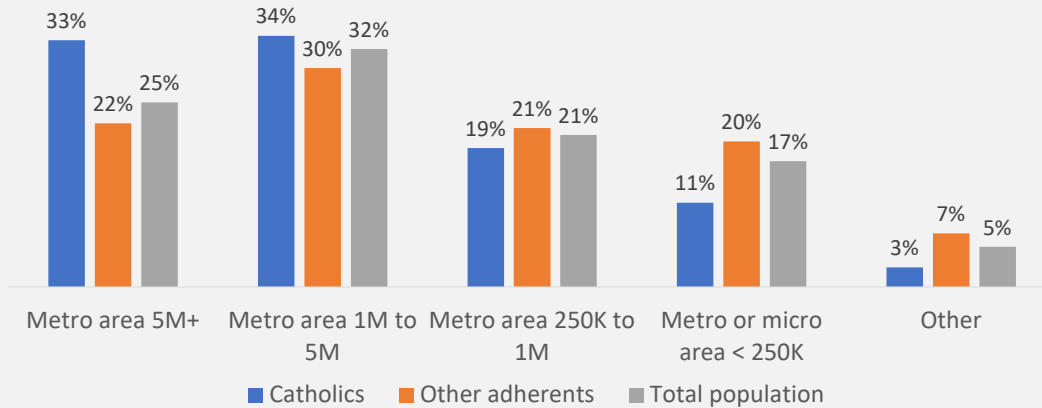
Given a much larger number of adherents than any other U.S. religious body, as well as fewer than half the congregations of other leading bodies, the Catholic Church has a very large number of adherents per congregation. The figure above shows the number of adherents per congregation for the ten largest religious bodies, listed in order of their number of adherents shown earlier.

We found an average of more than 3,000 adherents per congregation for Catholics, by far the largest in the Religion Census. No other body in the Religion Census had as many as 2,000 adherents per congregation. And only five other religious bodies, including only Muslims in the top ten, had as many as 1,000 adherents per congregation.

Of course, many Catholics, like others, may not attend religious services every weekend. Nevertheless, these data indicate that the average Catholic “flock” is quite large, and, with the decreasing number of congregations, growing.

Catholics Are More Prevalent in Larger Metropolitan Areas

Percent of group by area type

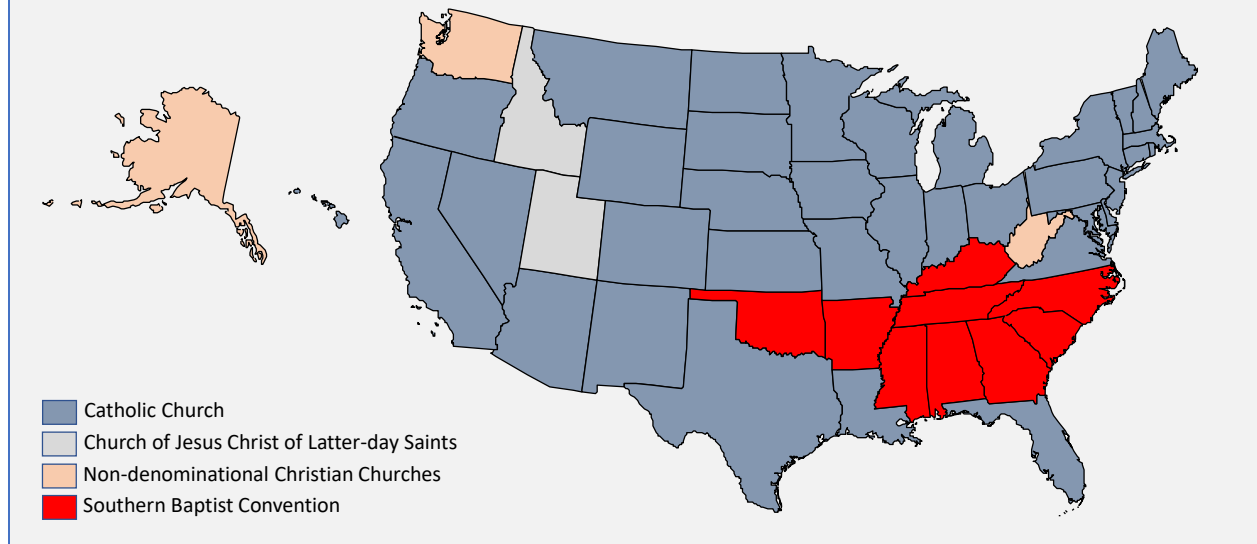


The Catholic Church does remain more concentrated in more populous areas. This figure shows the distribution of Catholics, other adherents in the Religion Census, and the total population in 2020 by type of area. For example, it shows 33 percent of all Catholics are in metropolitan areas of at least five million persons, while such areas are home to 25 percent of the total population and 22 percent of non-Catholic adherents.

Combining the two largest categories shows 67 percent of Catholic adherents are in metropolitan areas of more than one million persons, compared to 57 percent of the total population and 52 percent of other adherents.

At the other end, only 14 percent of Catholics are in areas of fewer than 250,000 persons or outside metropolitan and micropolitan areas. By contrast, 22 percent of the total population and 27 percent of non-Catholic adherents are in such areas.

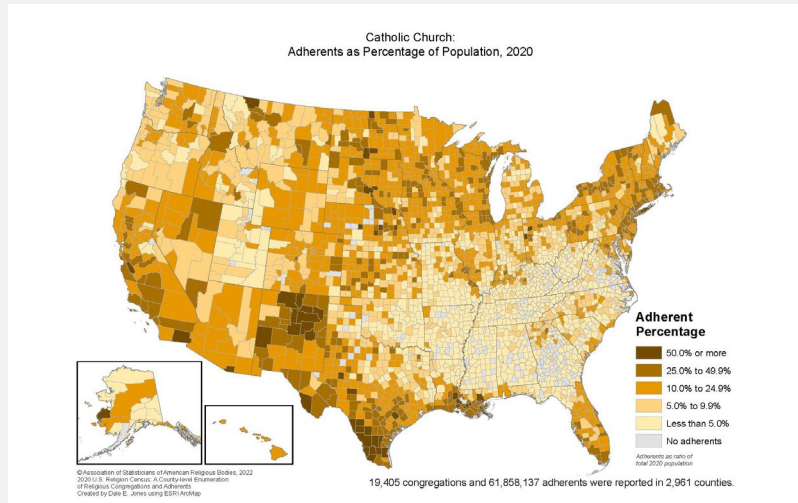
Leading Religious Body by State, 2020



In addition to being the single-largest religious body in the 2020 Religion Census, the Catholic Church is the single-largest religious body in most states. The map above reflects some long-standing patterns, including the prevalence of the Southern Baptist Convention in the Southeast and of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Utah and Idaho.

At the same time, there were some shifts from 2010 to 2020. The Catholic Church became the single-largest religious body in Missouri and Virginia, supplanting the Southern Baptist Convention in each state. Non-denominational Christian churches supplanted the Catholic Church as the single-largest religious body in Alaska and Washington state, and they supplanted the United Methodist Church as the single-largest religious body in West Virginia.

Catholic Prevalence by County Reflects Historical and Emerging Patterns



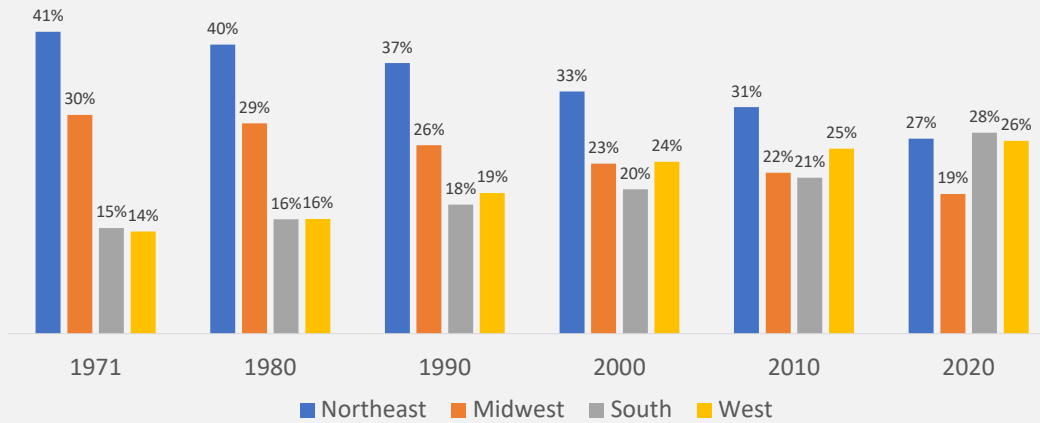
While Catholics have a large presence in every state, their presence within states can vary widely. The map above shows Catholic adherents as a percentage of the population by county, with darker shades indicating higher Catholic population percentages.

The darkest shade, showing 50 percent or more Catholic, is primarily in counties of New Mexico and along the Rio Grande in Texas. The next darkest shades, showing 25 to 50 percent Catholic, are prevalent in the Northeast, upper Midwest, the West, south Louisiana, and south Florida.

The areas of least Catholic presence are concentrated in the rural South, while many Southern metropolitan areas show some Catholic concentrations.

Catholics Are Shifting West and South

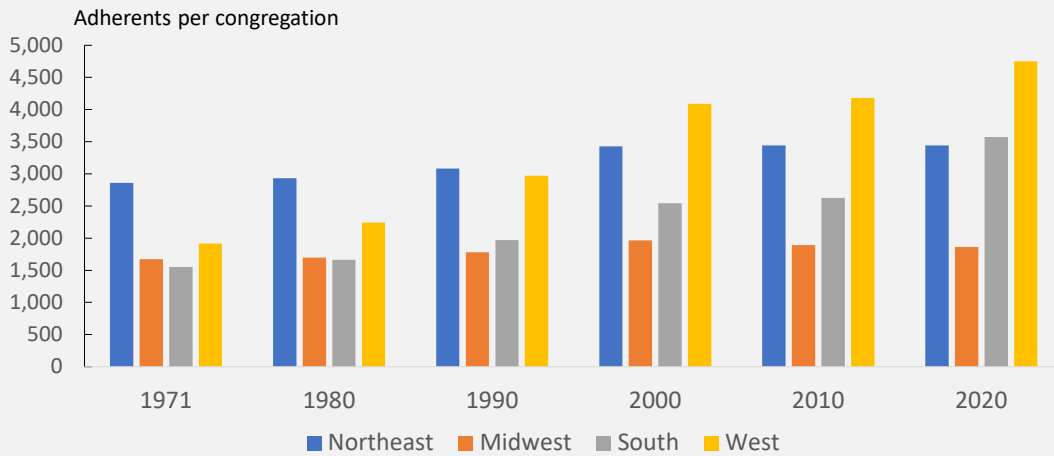
Percent of U.S. Catholics in region



There have been some broader changes within the Catholic Church. The above figure shows the distribution of Catholics by region in the Religion Census since 1971. For example, in 1971, 41 percent of Catholics were in the Northeast, while in 2020, 27 percent were.

In the past half-century, Catholic adherents, like the total U.S. population, has shifted from the Northeast and Midwest to the South and West. In fact, 2020 is the first year in which most Catholics were not in the Northeast and Midwest. In 1971, 71 percent of U.S. Catholics were in those regions; in 2020, 45 percent were. There are now more Catholics in the South (which encompasses states from Delaware to Texas and from Oklahoma to Florida) than in any other region.

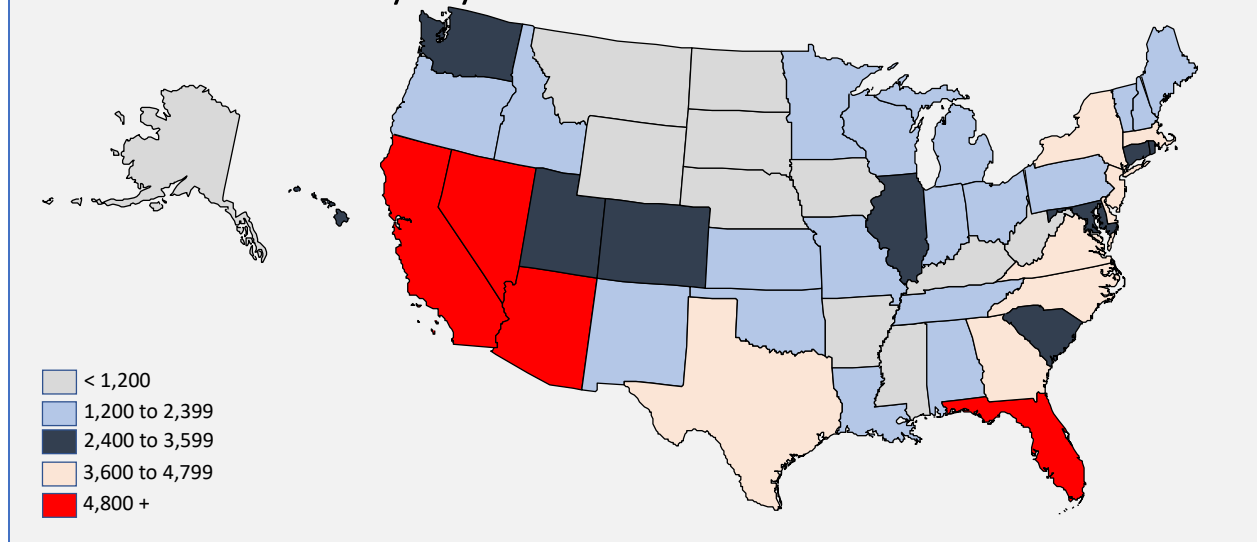
Catholic Congregation Size Growing in South and West



While the regional distribution of Catholic adherents has changed, the number of Catholic congregations has decreased slightly and not shifted as much. As a result, the average number of Catholics per congregation has changed sharply by region.

In the Northeast, the number of Catholics per congregation has increased from 2,861 in 1971 to 3,441 in 2020. In the Midwest, it increased from 1,672 to 1,863. In the South, it more than doubled, from 1,551 to 3,573. In the West, it also more than doubled, from 1,915 to 4,751.

The Number of Catholics Per Congregation Varies Widely by State



The number of Catholics per congregation does vary widely within region and by states. Nevada has the most, more than 10,000. California has more than 8,000, Florida has more than 7,000, and Arizona has nearly 6,000.

Even in states with the smallest number of Catholics per congregation, the average number per congregation is still high relative to most other religious bodies. For example, Alaska has 453 Catholics per congregation, the fewest in the nation. But that average is also the third-highest among all religious bodies in Alaska, and the highest for any religious body with seven or more congregations.

Religion Census Data Can Help Identify Catholic Home Mission Needs

- Religious characteristics
- Demographic characteristics
- Socioeconomic characteristics

Beyond providing an overview of the Catholic Church in the United States, Religion Census data can help identify Catholic home mission needs.

Religion Census data can identify current areas of home mission need and how such need it has changed over time. It can help identify the extent to which home mission need has become less widespread or intense. It can also help identify whether Catholic mission territory characteristics vary by region or state.

Religion Census data can also help identify the religious characteristics of home mission territories. This can include identifying how many persons are currently claimed by other religious bodies, the exact religious makeup of home mission territories, and how many are without religious affiliation.

Combining Religion Census data with U.S. Census data can help identify the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of home mission territories. Such combined data can help answer demographic questions such as how does the population in home mission territories compare to that of other counties? What is their racial and ethnic composition relative to other counties? What is their age structure relative to other counties. Combined Religion Census and U.S. Census data can also answer questions such as what is the level of educational attainment in home mission counties? How many persons in home mission territories are in poverty? What types of jobs are in these areas? Are there other socioeconomic conditions in a home mission county likely to affect its receptivity to a Catholic mission congregation?

We hope to explore these and similar questions in a subsequent analysis of Religion Census data in areas of home mission need.