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Knowledge and belief about the real presence

Mary Gautier | Oct. 24, 2011
Catholics in America

A Boy Scout serves as an extraordinary minister of Communion during a Catholic Scouting recognition Mass in March 2010 at Sacred Heart Cathedral in Rochester, N.Y. (CNS/Catholic Courier/Mike Crupi)

Eucharist

The Catholic church teaches that in the consecration of the Eucharist, the bread and wine really become the body and blood of Jesus Christ. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says, ?In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist ?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 is a key doctrine of the faith and a teaching that sets Catholics apart from most other Christians.

However, for many Catholics there is a gap between their knowledge of the church?s teaching regarding the real presence and what their beliefs are. Interestingly enough, many Catholics believe what their church teaches even when they do not know that their church teaches it. Perhaps this is just a classic case of source amnesia -- people believe many things that they have learned even though they are unable to recall the source of that belief. It turns out, though, that what people believe is at least as important to their practice of the faith as what they know.

To explore the implications of this gap, we asked both a knowledge question and a belief question in our 2011 survey. We found that half of adult Catholics (50 percent) know the church?s teaching regarding the real presence and half do not. We also found that close to two-thirds of adult Catholics (63 percent) believe that ?at the consecration during a Catholic Mass, the bread and wine really become the body and blood of Jesus Christ.? Therefore, more adult Catholics believe the statement than understand its source. But how are these two items related?

Using these two questions, on belief in and knowledge of the real presence, Catholics can be divided into four distinct types. The first are the knowledgeable believers who know what the church teaches regarding the Eucharist and also express a belief in this teaching. Not quite half of adult Catholics in this study (46 percent)

are knowledgeable believers.

The opposite of this type, and the second largest group in size (33 percent of respondents), are the unknowing unbelievers. They do not know what the church teaches regarding the Eucharist nor do they believe in this teaching. Among all those Catholics who do not know what the church teaches regarding the real presence, two-thirds are in this type.

A third type, unknowing believers, believe in the real presence but believe wrongly that the church teaches that the bread and wine are only symbols of the body and blood of Jesus Christ. This group constitutes 17 percent of all Catholics but they make up a third of the Catholics who do not know what the church teaches regarding this doctrine.

A final type, only 4 percent of respondents, is the knowledgeable doubters. These Catholics are aware of what the church teaches but say they do not believe it. Among all Catholics who know what the church teaches about the real presence, fewer than one in 10 (9 percent) say that they do not believe the doctrine.

Characteristics of types

Using a statistical technique called logistic regression, we can describe some of the characteristics that are typical among Catholics of each type.

For example, the profile of the knowledgeable believer is a white, Vatican II or post-Vatican II Catholic (born between 1941 and 1980) from the South or the Midwest, who hasn?t gone to college and votes independent. This type tends to be moderately (but not highly) committed to the church, attends Mass weekly, prays daily, and says they will never leave the church.

The typical unknowing unbeliever, a third of adult Catholics, is more likely to be a white, Vatican II or post-Vatican II Catholic who lives in the Northeast and votes Democrat or independent (but not Republican). This type seldom or never attends Mass, seldom or never prays, and says they might consider leaving the church (although they still identify themselves as Catholic).

The third largest type, the unknowing believer (17 percent of adult Catholics), is a little more challenging to classify, as they are not concentrated in a particular generation. The typical unknowing believer is Hispanic and lives in the Midwest or West. This type is more likely to be a Democrat or an independent than a Republican and typically has not attended college. They are committed to the church, although they attend Mass irregularly.

The smallest type (4 percent of adult self-identified Catholics) is the knowledgeable doubter. The typical member of this group is a millennial Catholic (born in 1961 or later), who is white, college-educated, and living in the Northeast or the West. They are irregular Mass attendees but pray daily. They are more likely to have a moderate to high commitment to the church, although they say they might consider leaving.

Despite the variation among these four types in terms of their characteristics and even their religious practice, their motivations for attending Mass are surprisingly consistent. We asked these Catholics to tell us, among a half-dozen different motivations, which is a very important reason for them to attend church. Across all four types, at least three in four say that an important reason for them is they enjoy experiencing the liturgy. The experience is apparently rewarding and meaningful even if they do not share the same intellectual understanding of it.

Similarly, more than half to about two-thirds say that an important reason for attending is that they enjoy being with others in church. Again, the experience of being with others is an important motivation for all four types.

Finally, all four types also agree that feeling the need to receive the sacrament of Communion is an important reason why they attend. Although a majority within each type agree that this is an important reason, the believers are even more likely than the unbelievers to say that this is an important reason for them to attend Mass. Believing in the real presence adds meaning to their experience of the sacrament, whether or not they understand that this is also what the church teaches.

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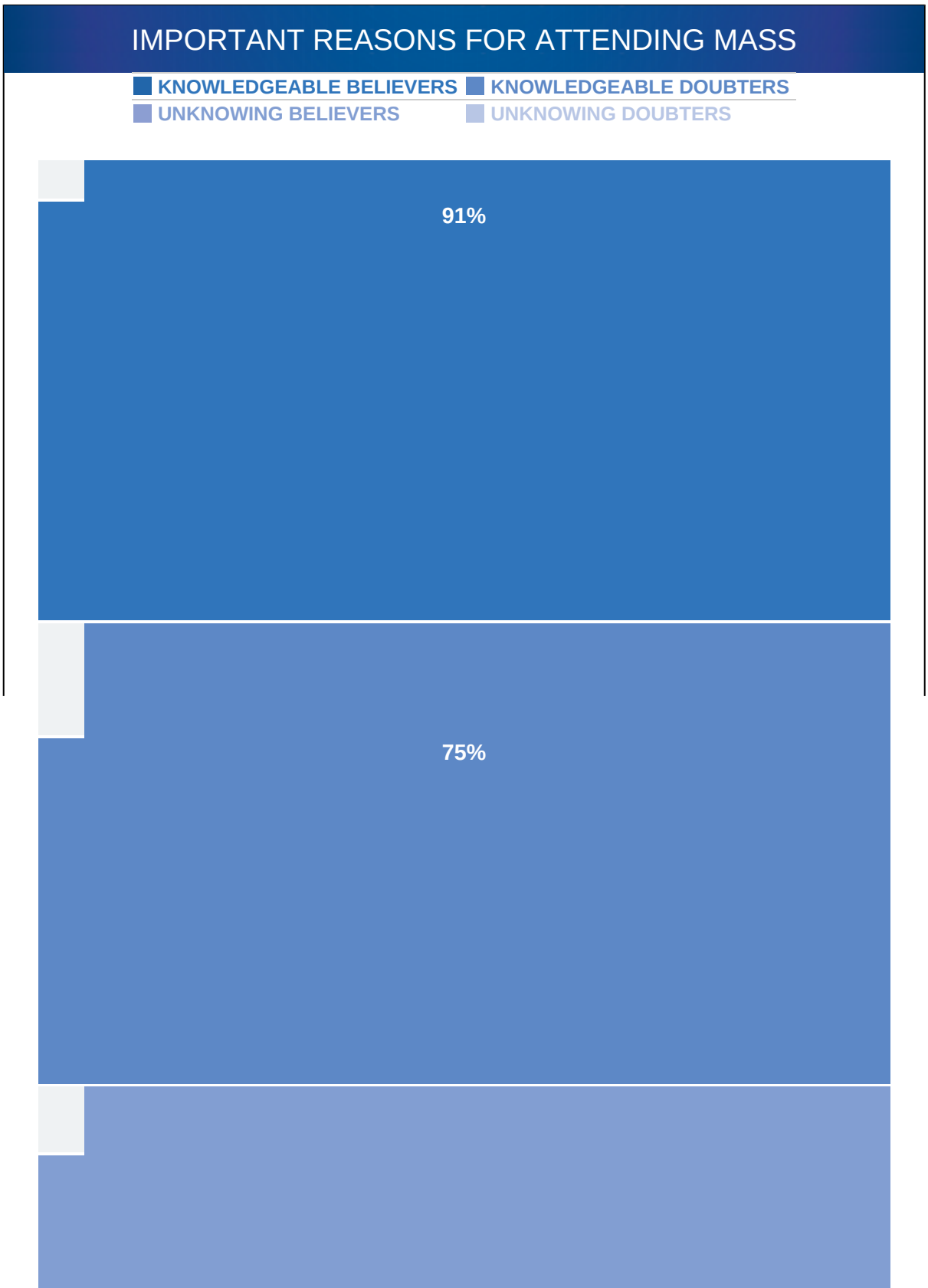
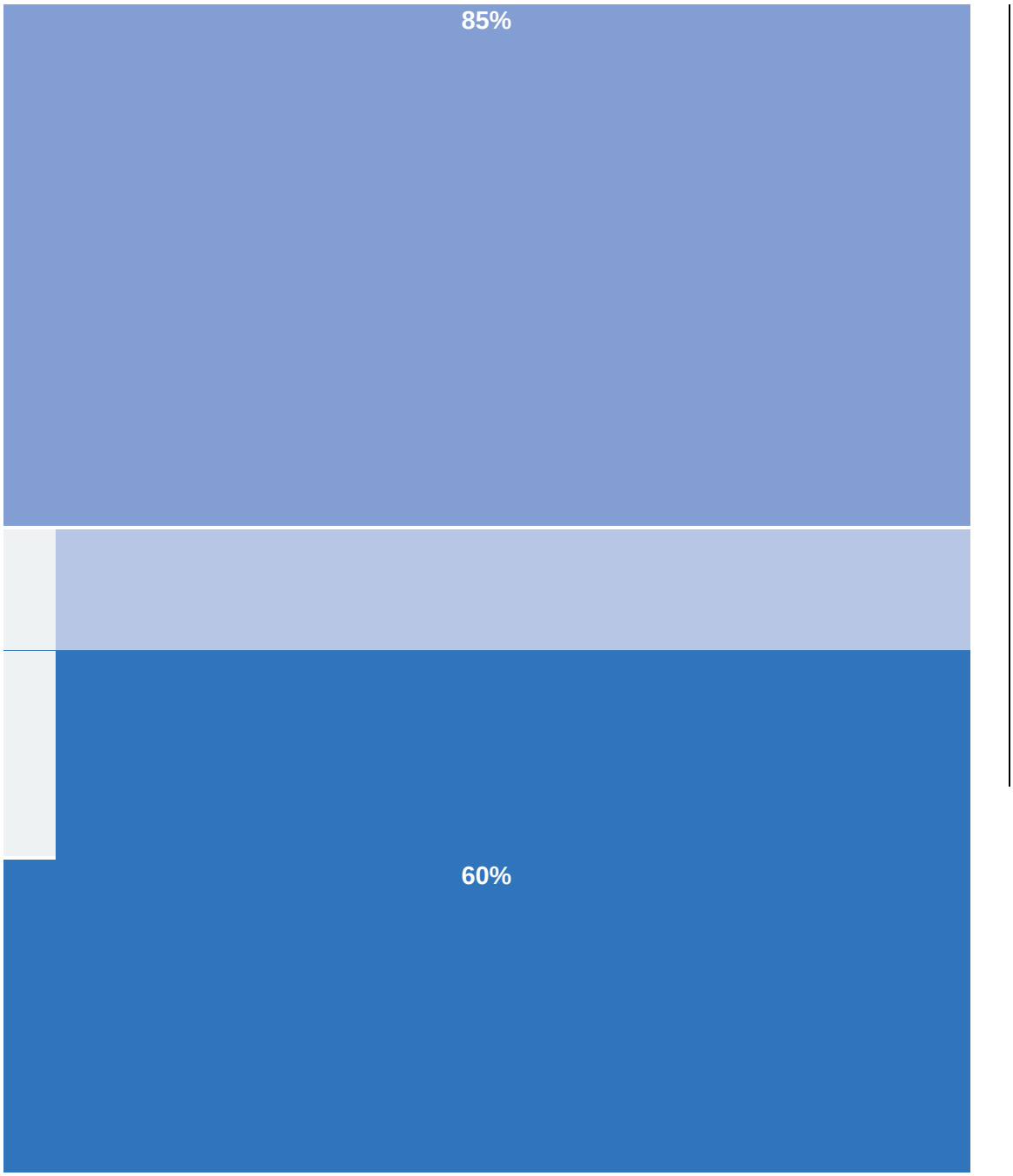
FIGURE 12


IMPORTANT REASONS FOR ATTENDING MASS
KNOWLEDGEABLE BELIEVERS
KNOWLEDGEABLE DOUBTERS
UNKNOWING BELIEVERS
UNKNOWING DOUBTERS
91%
75%


85%
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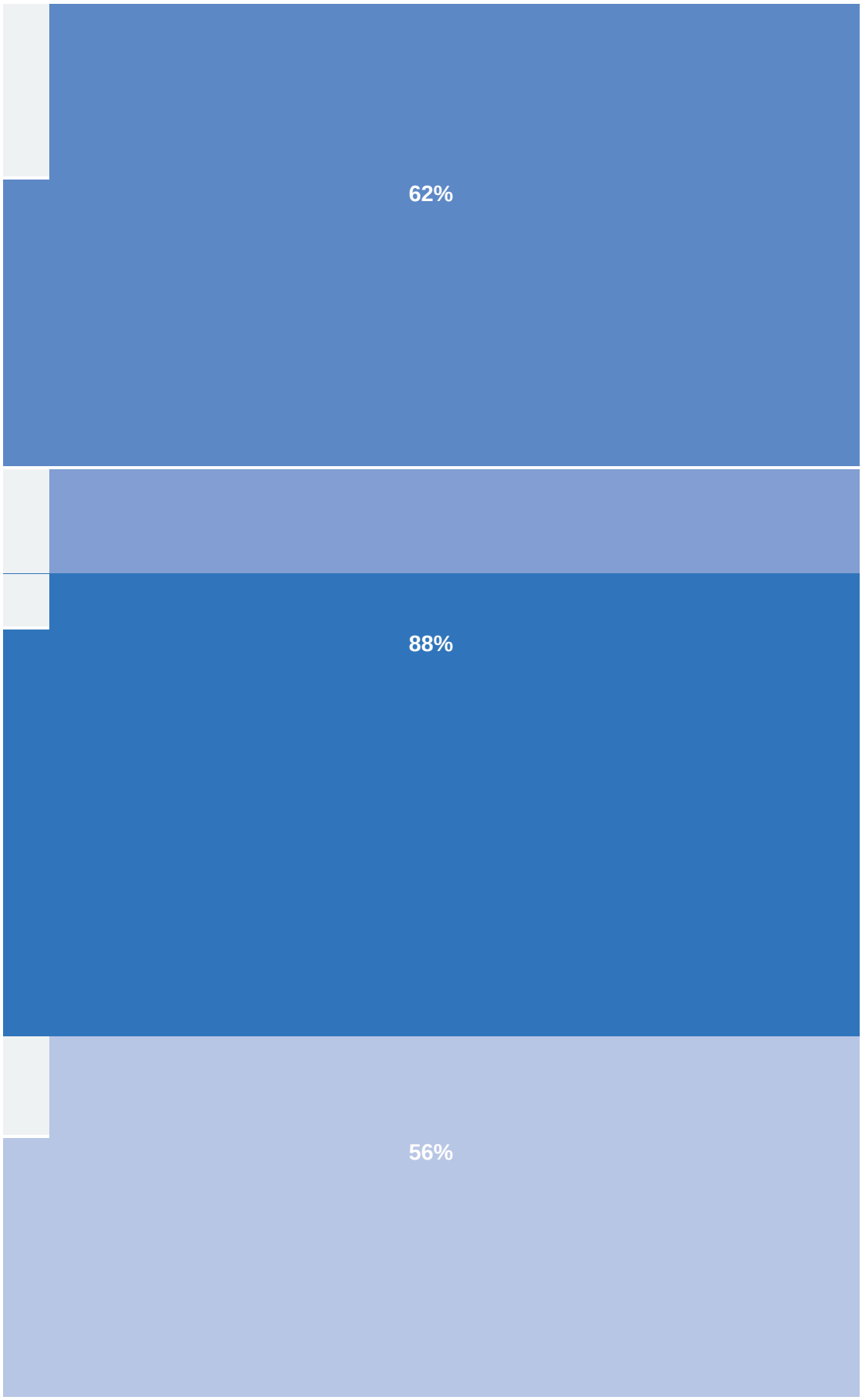
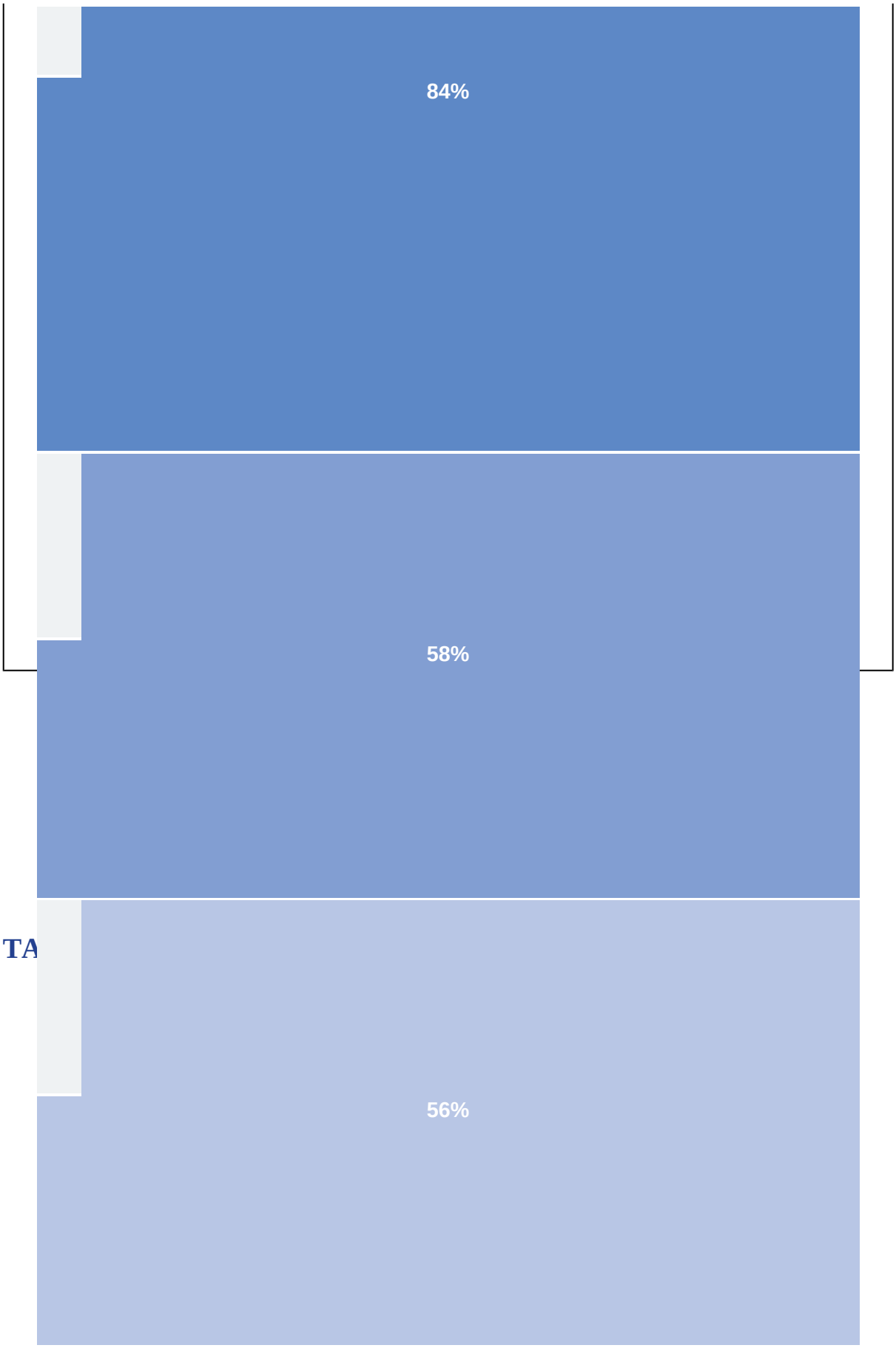


Enjoy being with others in church



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Felt need to receive the sacrament

DISENTANGLING KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEF ABOUT THE REAL PRESENCE AMONG ADULT CATHOLICS

KNOWLEDGE: Which of the following statements best describes the Catholic teaching about the bread and wine used for communion?

BELIEF: Do you believe that at the consecration during a Catholic Mass, the bread and wine really become the body and blood of Jesus Christ?

	THE BREAD AND WINE REALLY BECOME THE BODY AND BLOOD OF JESUS CHRIST. 50%	THE BREAD AND WINE ARE ONLY SYMBOLS OF THE BODY AND BLOOD OF JESUS CHRIST. 50%
YES, IT DOES HAPPEN 63%	Knowledgeable believers: **46%** Among those that know, **91%** believe	Unknowing believers: **17%** Among those that do not know, **33%** believe
NO, IT DOES NOT HAPPEN 37%	Knowledgeable doubters: **4%** Among those that know, **9%** do not believe	Unknowing unbelievers: **33%** Among those that do not know, **65%** do not believe

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