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Worshippers pray during a weekly Sunday Mass at St. Martha Church in Uniondale, N.Y., Aug. 15, 2021. In-person Sunday Mass attendance in the U.S. is back to 2019 pre-pandemic levels of 24%, according to data from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz, CNS)

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Sunday Mass attendance in person at Catholic churches in the U.S. is back to pre-pandemic levels — although just under one quarter of the nation's Catholics are in the pews on a regular weekly basis.

The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University noted in a Feb. 5 post on its Nineteen Sixty-four research blog that Sunday Mass attendance in person has risen to 24% since the declared end of the COVID-19 pandemic in May 2023. That rate has held through the first week of 2025.

From the start of the pandemic lockdowns in March 2020 to May 2023, attendance had averaged 15%. Prior to the pandemic, the average attendance was 24.4%.

Mark Gray, CARA's director of polls and editor of the blog, told OSV News that attendance figures recently released by the Diocese of Arlington, Virginia, had underscored a trend he and his colleagues had identified.

"It's something I noticed, and then when the Diocese of Arlington posted their October headcount numbers ... I thought, all right, I'll go ahead and put this (data) out there," said Gray, referencing an annual tally of Mass attendance undertaken by many U.S. dioceses.

Gray — who is also a research associate professor at Georgetown University — and his colleagues relied on data from their various national surveys, along with Google Trends queries that he said "allow you to see variations in how frequently people are searching for" certain terms that "would correlate with Mass attendance."

"It's not a direct measurement, but it's a proxy," Gray explained.

He also noted that the dip in data does not account for those who relied on livestreamed and televised liturgies during the pandemic lockdowns.

"We've looked at those numbers too," he said. "We can alter the search terms and Google Trends to different queries. And we did that in the past, and we saw that

about the same percentage of Catholics were participating in Mass during lockdowns, if you included watching on television or watching on the internet. And then we've got surveys on engaging in-person Mass attendance, and watching on television or the internet."

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Gray said the Mass attendance data "almost looks like a straighter distribution once you include the television and internet numbers" during the pandemic lockdowns.

He also noted that pandemic lockdowns were "a local situation" in which some areas "opened up ... quickly" and "others stayed closed for much longer."

But since "this last Christmas in 2024, things are back to normal," he said.

Some Masses during the year generally reflect "spikes" in attendance, Gray said, with Christmas, Easter and then Ash Wednesday the most well-attended liturgies.

"We're always interested in Ash Wednesday," since "it's probably one of the most unusual days," said Gray.

"It's not a holy day of obligation, but it's the third highest attendance of Mass historically, according to the data," he said. "And it also has probably the highest participation of young adult Catholics."

And, Gray added, "If there's any moment that the church has to reach out to young adult Catholics, Lent and specifically Ash Wednesday is the time. So it's always a good barometer to see what activity looks like during that period, because it gives you a little view into the future of the next generation of Catholics."