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Holy map : Searching for the Catholic church's centre of gravity

How has its influence changed over time?

Full text:

IT IS THE most sacred week in the Christian calendar. Tens of thousands of Catholics will descend on Vatican City for Easter Sunday Mass on April 20th, which will celebrate Jesus's resurrection. The pope would usually preside over at least eight ceremonies during Holy Week. This year, still recovering from double pneumonia, Pope Francis is more restricted. But on April 17th he nevertheless managed a visit to a prison in Rome.

Francis has led the Roman Catholic church since Benedict XVI resigned in 2013. Born in Argentina, he is the first pope from the southern hemisphere, and the only non-European pope in nearly 1,300 years.

His election reflected a broader geographical shift in the church. Although the Vatican has been Catholicism's spiritual and administrative home since the Reformation in the 16th century, the church's centre of gravity is moving. *The Economist* has traced this using two indicators: one for the faithful and another for the papacy.

The first, calculated with data from the Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, an American evangelical institute, shows the statistical centre of global Catholic populations since 33AD. The method finds the point at which equal numbers of Catholics live to the north, south, east and west (see map 1).

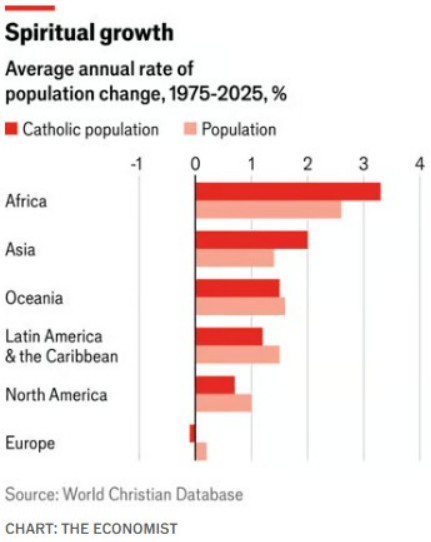
Mass migration

Catholic centre of gravity*

*Location of where equal numbers of Catholics live to the north, south, east and west. On modern borders
Source: World Christian Database

This method traces the Church's complex history. The statistical centre started in the hills and deserts around Bethlehem (believed to be Jesus's birthplace) and Jerusalem (where he was crucified). After his death, his apostle Peter, regarded by Catholics as the first pope, travelled to Rome, which was then the bustling capital of the empire. According to Catholic belief, Peter was executed by Emperor Nero on Vatican Hill, a pagan burial site outside ancient Rome. (He is said to have asked to be crucified upside down; he did not feel worthy to die in the same way as Jesus.) This area gradually transformed into the church's headquarters—less for its ties to Jesus's life, and more for its political and symbolic power.

Catholicism continued to grow outside Europe, too. Between 200AD and 400AD the Catholic population in north Africa grew from 100,000 to 1.6m because of urbanisation and missionary work. This growth ended in part because of the rise of Islam in the 7th century, pulling the Catholic demographic centre towards Europe, where it reached its northernmost peak in 1500.



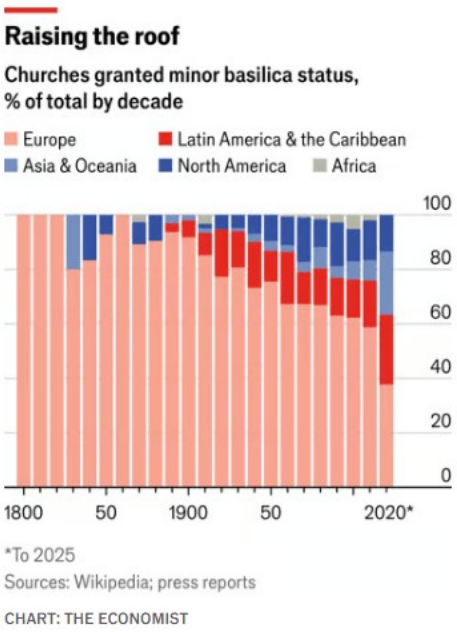
In the 20th and 21st centuries, the Church's rapid growth in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia triggered a southward shift once again. The World Christian Database shows that Africa and Asia are the only regions in the world where the increase in the number of Catholics has outpaced population growth over the past 50 years (see chart 1). In Europe, by contrast, the number has fallen slightly; the continent's share of Catholics has shrunk from 37% in 1975 to 32% in 2025. The Gordon-Conwell researchers reckon that the Church's demographic centre is now somewhere around Senegal's southern border. Based on demographic projections by the United Nations this could move to the Ivory Coast by 2050.

Our second map shows the geographical centre of the papacy. It averages the longitude and latitude of the birthplaces of all popes over time, weighted by the lengths of their reigns.

These data show how the power of the church has remained rooted in Italy despite the growth in worshippers elsewhere. There have been 265 popes since Peter (who was born near the Golan Heights). Of the 260 whose birthplaces are known, 80% were from modern-day Italy.

By our calculations the centre of the papacy remains close to Rome. But that trend is weakening. John Paul II, who was head of the Church at the turn of the 21st century, was born in Poland. His successor, Benedict XVI, was German. When Francis became pope he said that it seemed as if the conclave had "gone to fetch (him) almost from the end of the world".

Francis's eventual successor might shift things further. The body that will elect the next pope is currently made up of 136 cardinals from 94 countries. Only 39% are from Europe, with a record number from Asia and Africa.



This institutional shift is also visible in the distribution of basilicas (Catholic churches granted special status by a pope for their historical, spiritual or architectural importance). We estimate that roughly 1,700 churches have been given this designation over the past 200 years—and more than 70% are in Europe. But that is changing. In the 2010s over 40% of new basilicas were outside Europe; in the past five years that has grown to 62% (see chart 2).

Rome remains the centre of power in the church. But demographically and institutionally, the faith is shifting south and east—along with the growing number of believers in the global south.■

https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2025/04/17/searching-for-the-catholic-churchs-centre-of-gravity