

# [***Why US Catholics are planning pilgrimages in communities across the nation***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6C2G-D291-JC5B-G2Y3-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

A long-planned series of Catholic pilgrimages has begun across the United States this weekend, with pilgrims embarking on four routes before converging on Indianapolis in two months for a major gathering focusing on Eucharistic rites and devotions.

The National Eucharistic Pilgrimage is beginning with Masses and other events in California, Connecticut, Minnesota and Texas. A small group of pilgrims plan to walk entire routes, but most participants are expected to take part for smaller segments. [*Each route*](https://www.eucharisticpilgrimage.org/) goes along country roads and through city centers, with multiple stops at parishes, shrines and other sites.

Although it was forged amid a [*recent debate*](https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-religion-maryland-baltimore-9543775a53024d45c818b32062814927) among bishops over whether to refuse Communion to U.S. politicians who don’t oppose abortion, the pilgrimage is a revival of a historic Catholic tradition that faded by the mid-20th century.

Each procession is being led by a priest holding a monstrance — typically a sunburst-patterned vessel that displays the host, or bread wafer consecrated by a priest at Mass.

The Catholic Church teaches the “whole Christ is truly present — body, blood, soul, and divinity — under the appearances of bread and wine,” according to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. As a result, the consecrated host becomes an object of devotion.

“The Eucharist is actually Jesus, so for us to walk with Jesus is actually a witness to our faith in a prayerful action for unity, for peace," said Tim Glemkowski, CEO of the National Eucharistic Congress, the umbrella organization for the events.

The four lengthy pilgrimages appear to be unprecedented, Glemkowski said.

“It’s hard in a 2,000-year-old church to do something for the first time, but a procession this long, with this many people in it, may be the first time this has been attempted in the history of the Catholic Church,” Glemkowski said.

Some pilgrims were embarking Sunday from the headwaters of the Mississippi River in Minnesota. Others planned to embark from a cathedral in Brownsville, Texas, or cross San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge.

In New Haven, Connecticut, commemorations began with a Saturday night Mass and a mini-procession around St. Mary's Church, which is the burial site of the 19th century founder of the Knights of Columbus fraternal organization, the Rev. Michael McGivney. After an all-night vigil of prayer and adoration, pilgrims were bringing the host to another New Haven church and later to a boat to carry it to the city of Bridgeport and the next leg of the pilgrimage.

The pilgrimage amounts to an effort to revive a type of mass devotion that was once more common in past generations of Catholicism in the U.S. and beyond.

The pilgrimages — and the concluding National Eucharistic Congress, expected to draw tens of thousands to Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis in July — is being funded by private donors, sponsors and ticket sales, Glemkowski said. The budget for the National Eucharistic Revival — which is actually a three-year process that has included parish activities as well as the pilgrimages and congress — is about $23 million, with $14 million of that for the congress, he said.

There have been nine previous U.S. gatherings under the name of the National Eucharistic Congress — but none since 1941.

“We just kind of lost track of this tradition,” Glemkowski said. “We’re bringing it back in a way that fits this time.”

Glemkowski said the pilgrimage is not a march and would avoid ***politics***. “That message of unity and peace and just focus on Christ is paramount,” he said.

The idea for these pilgrimages sprang from deliberations among U.S. bishops.

Their 2021 document, “The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church,” arose amid debate over whether bishops should withhold Communion from Catholic politicians who supported abortion rights. The document ultimately did not directly address that, though it called on Catholics to examine whether they align with church teachings and said bishops have a “special responsibility” to respond to "public actions at variance with the visible Communion of the church and the moral law.”

At the same time, the document reflected bishops’ worries that many Catholics don’t know or accept the church’s teachings about the significance of the sacrament, though surveys have given mixed results on that question.

Timothy Kelly, professor of history at Saint Vincent College in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, said it's an open question how many participants the pilgrimage will draw. His 2009 book, “The Transformation of American Catholicism," documents the rise and decline of stadium-sized devotional activities such as Eucharistic adoration in 20th century Pittsburgh.

Many early 20th century Catholics were from immigrant communities, and they often gathered at times of flood, war or other crises. “A lot of times in the older demonstrations, the message seemed to be outward toward the broader community — the Catholics bearing witness to their presence and their faith, but also saying, ‘We’re here and we matter.’”

But participation began dropping sharply by the 1950s. “What happened was the laity stopped being interested in it,” Kelly said.

The Eucharistic pilgrimage, he said, appears to be attracting the most interest in Catholic media sympathetic with other [*efforts to revive older traditions*](https://apnews.com/article/catholic-church-shift-orthodoxy-tradition-7638fa2013a593f8cb07483ffc8ed487), such as the Latin Mass.

“Which makes me curious, how well does this resonate within the broader Catholic community?” he said.

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