

“A Failure to Die”

Countering Death-Denying Culture Through Orthodox Catechism

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This study posits that the understanding of death, in a uniquely Christian context, is the primary necessity for true Christian discipleship. Without the acceptance of the cross and the willingness to die with Christ, one cannot encounter Him in the resurrection. However, this embrace of death, and its subsequent use for our spiritual benefit, has radically disappeared in modern times. Current society neither accepts death as a natural part of life (as was the case in the Old Testament) nor does it embrace it as the path to salvation (as in the New Testament). Rather, it seeks to avoid it at all cost – to somehow diminish its power over us by relegating it to the collective subconscious. In the quest to make death irrelevant, we have inadvertently placed life in the same category.

“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me.”

- Matthew 16:24

“The birth pangs are upon me. Grant me this, brothers: do not hinder me from living, do not wish that I should die. Do not give the world the one who wishes to be God’s, nor charm him with the material. Allow me to receive the pure light. When I have arrived there, I will truly be human.”

- St. Ignatius of Antioch (Rom. 6:2)

Death-Denying Culture

Before the Enlightenment

- Until the age of scientific progress, human beings accepted the idea of a continued existence after death.
- This belief helped mitigate the fear of death and influenced the way in which Christians approached the rituals for burial and mourning. The deceased body was not seen as something to be feared but rather a temple to be honored.
- In the early Middle Ages, in the West, after death, the body was laid out either on a piece of precious cloth or dyed fabric and was visible in the house.
- Later it was transported to the place of burial and placed in a sarcophagus. Thus, the body, including the face, remained visible until the final closing of the sarcophagus.
- For Christians, the human body, bearing the image and likeness of God, was not tainted, but sanctified by the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Therefore, even in death, the body remains an icon that is to be venerated, incensed, and most importantly viewed.

Death-Denying Culture

Before the Enlightenment

- Before the Enlightenment death was a communal experience – it involved the whole family and indeed, the whole community. The individual was cared for by his loved ones. Illness and death were seen as natural parts of life, the care for those leaving this life the responsibility of those around them. The end of life was a sacred event during which one was able to prepare themselves through confession, prayer, and participating in the sacraments and by this method, face the great enemy of death with courage and faith. Through suffering, one found meaning and those at their bedside, through their own co-suffering, received insight into their own mortality. Ultimately it was love that was expressed through the care of the dying.

Death-Denying Culture

During the Enlightenment

- During the enlightenment there was a movement towards the devaluation of the hour of death.
- The absence of belief in an afterlife led to the desacralization of the body itself.
- The Pauline teaching of the body being the temple of Holy Spirit gave way to the view of the body as simply an object devoid of life - a machine to be understood.
- The objectification of the body as a “corpse” and not as a holy temple, an image of God, contributed to the secularization of death in general.
- This mentality paved the way for the rise of the modern funeral industry and the disastrous effect it would have on human contemplation of the afterlife.

Death-Denying Culture

The Modern Funeral Industry

- Three social factors:
 - 1. Changes and demographic patterns.
 - 2. The rise of hospitals as places of dying.
 - 3. The growth of modern funeral homes.



Death-Denying Culture

Changes in Demographics & Hospitals

- Due to the industrial revolution poverty began to drastically decrease.
- Populations began to gravitate from a rural to a more cosmopolitan setting as most began to work in factories.
- Subsequently a longer life expectancy meant that less and less people were experiencing death in their every day lives.
- The proliferation of hospitals and the availability of cheaper health care also shifted the locus of illness away from the home.
- This “medicalization” of death not only established the doctor as the crucial professional figure in charge of the dying process, but also shaped public attitudes about the meaning of death.
- With the shift from death in home to death in the hospital, death was effectively removed from the public consciousness.

Death-Denying Culture

The Funeral Industry

- The responsibility of caring for the dead was removed from the immediate family and community and placed in the hands of the “death professionals.”
- Embalming, although having been practiced to some degree as early as the 14th century, became more sophisticated and frequent.
- In a sense, embalming became yet another rebellion against the natural order of creation. Instead of confronting the effects of death, society attempted to mask them.

Death-Denying Culture

The main effects of the modern funeral industry on the Church and the general population include:

- The Church relegated the responsibility of heralding death to the doctor.
- There's a need to prolong one's happiness in life by not speaking about impending death.
- Death becomes dirty. In the second half of the 19th century, death ceases to be always seen as beautiful and is sometimes even depicted as disgusting.
- Death in the home becomes unbearable. Our senses can no longer tolerate the sights and smells of death.
- The rejection and elimination of mourning: Funerals became private and by invitation only. Children were not allowed to attend funerals, even the funerals of their parents.
- By the 1970s cremation overtakes traditional burial as the preferred method of disposing of one's dead. It is cheaper and contributes to the already existing "out of sight, out of mind" mentality regarding death.

The State of the Catechumenate Today

Purpose of the Surveys

- The first survey focused on a wide range of Orthodox converts who had experienced a variety of different catechetical programs.
- The second survey focused on the priests and lay catechists who were preparing the same individuals to enter the Orthodox Church.
- The subjects questioned in this study are all Orthodox Christians who attend parishes under the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Canada.
- There was a random sampling of individuals who had been both catechized by the author and by other clergy in the country.

The State of the Catechumenate Today

Methodology - Convert Survey

- Questions posed to those who had converted focused primarily on two main areas:
 - 1. Their experience of the catechumenate.
 - 2. Their experience of life after conversion.
- It is important to note that the ultimate purpose of these questions was to compare and contrast the catechism experience to the so-called effects it had on peoples' lives after they had gone through the process.

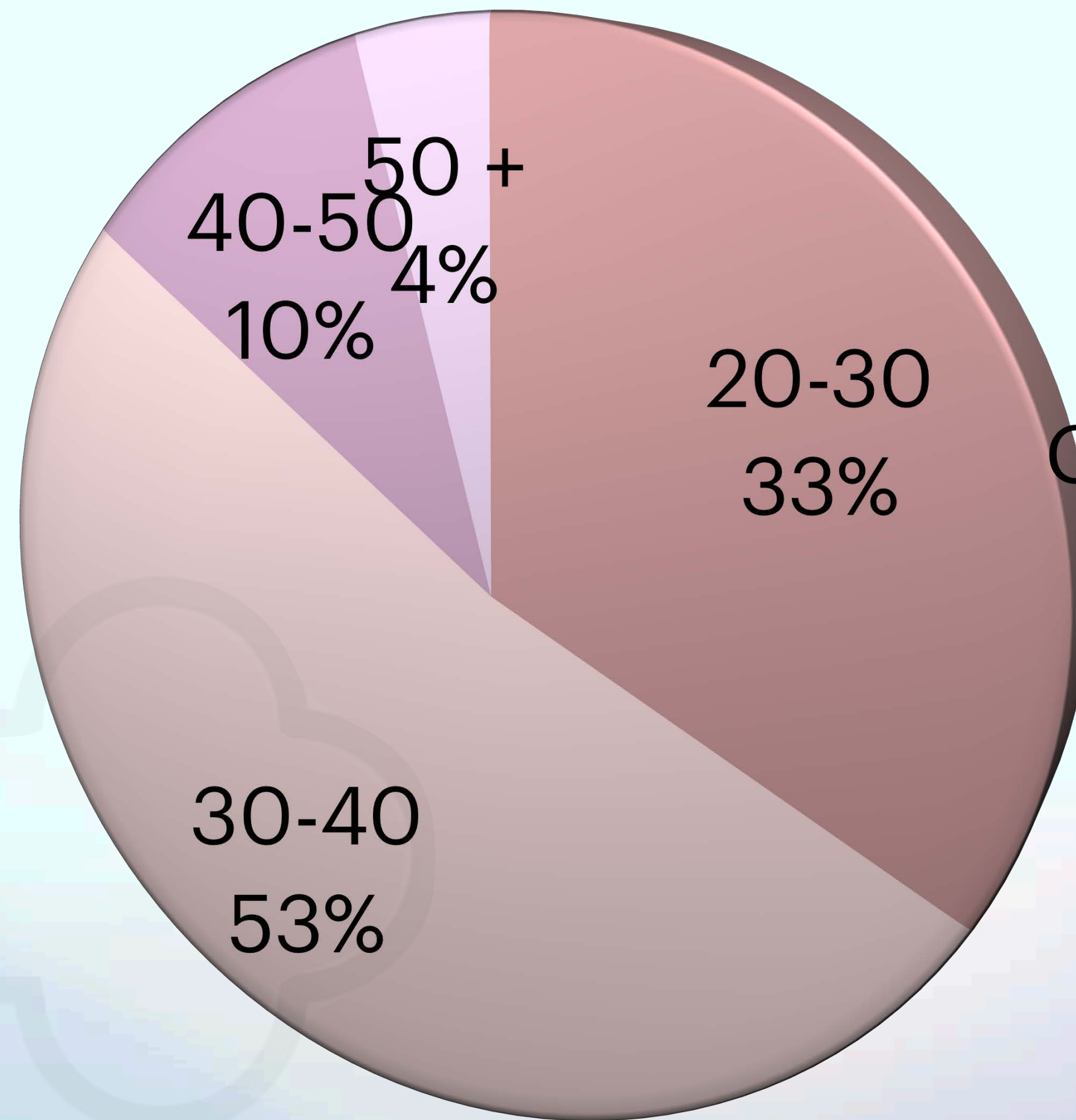
The State of the Catechumenate Today

Methodology - Priest Survey

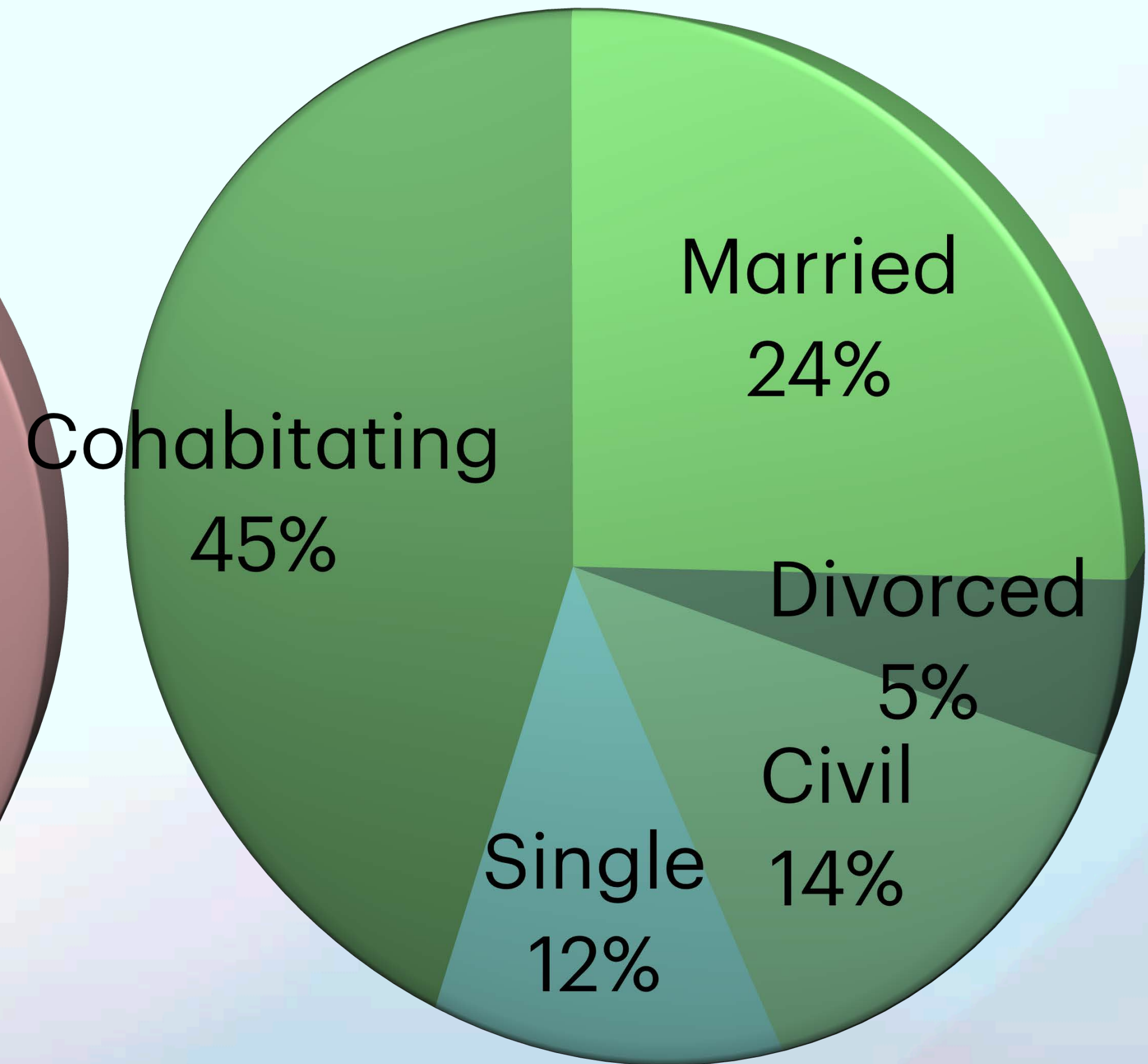
- The second survey presents questions posed to those priests/catechists who have been carrying out the catechetical process. This survey focused primarily on two main areas:
 - 1. The identity of the priest/catechist.
 - 2. The method and content of the catechesis being offered.
- As was the case with the convert survey, the main purpose of this survey was to ascertain the level of quality of the catechetical approach as well as to identify any deficiencies.
- What follows is a brief analysis of the data from both surveys. For the sake of brevity and coherence the data has been synthesized into interpreted statements.

Who is Converting?

During Catechism



Ages

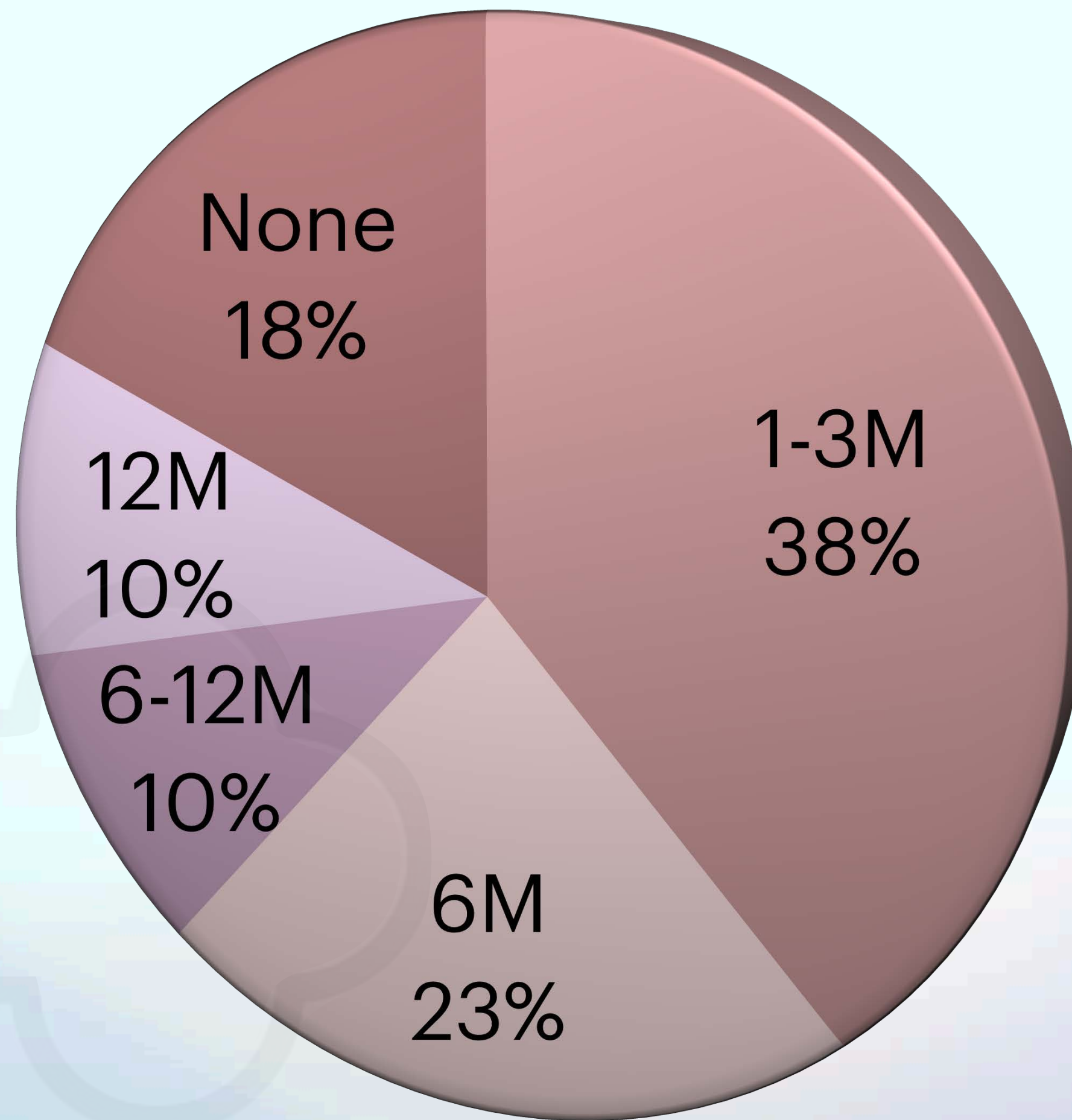


Status

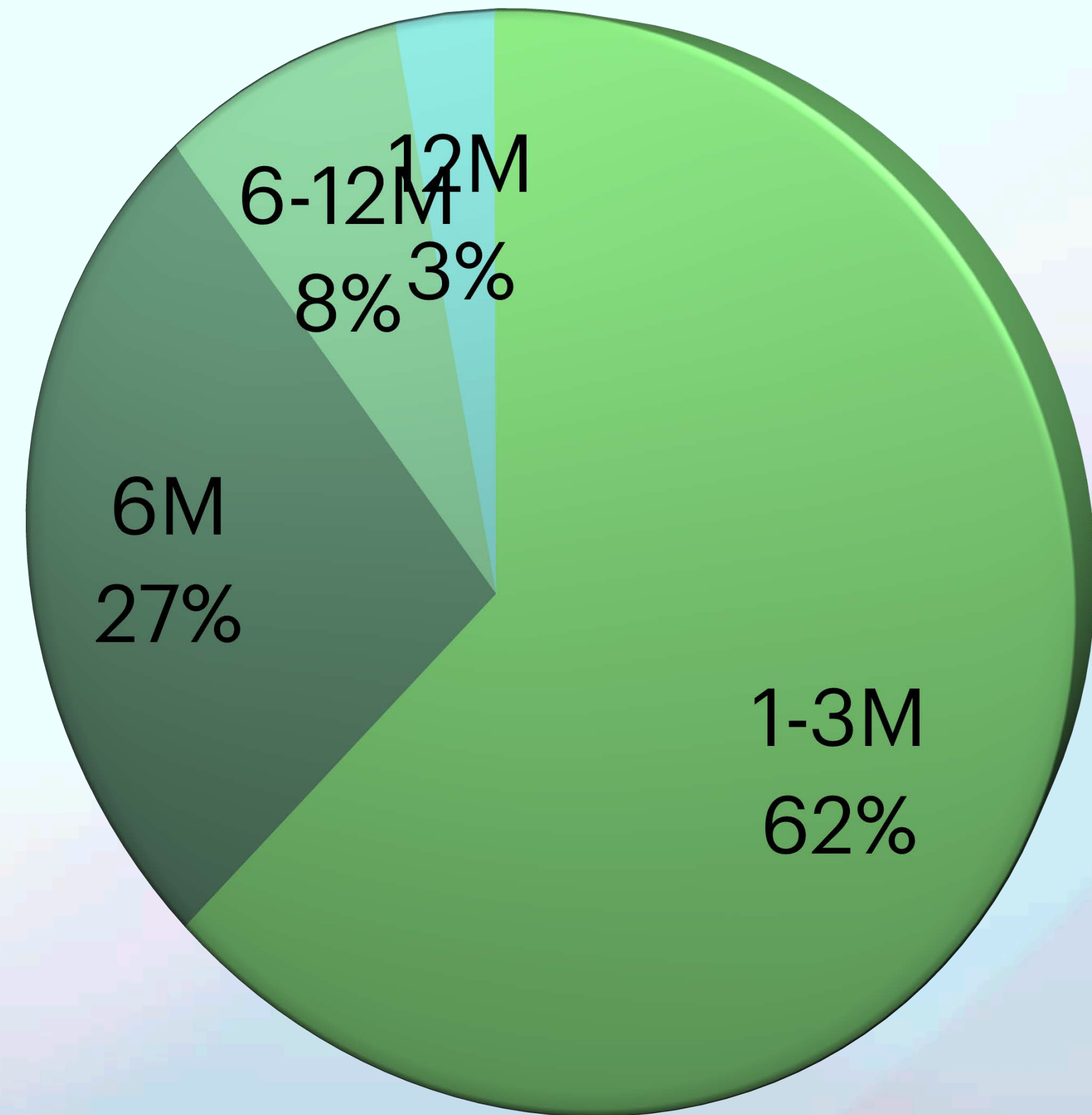
Duration of Catechism

During Catechism

“How long was your catechism?”



Converts

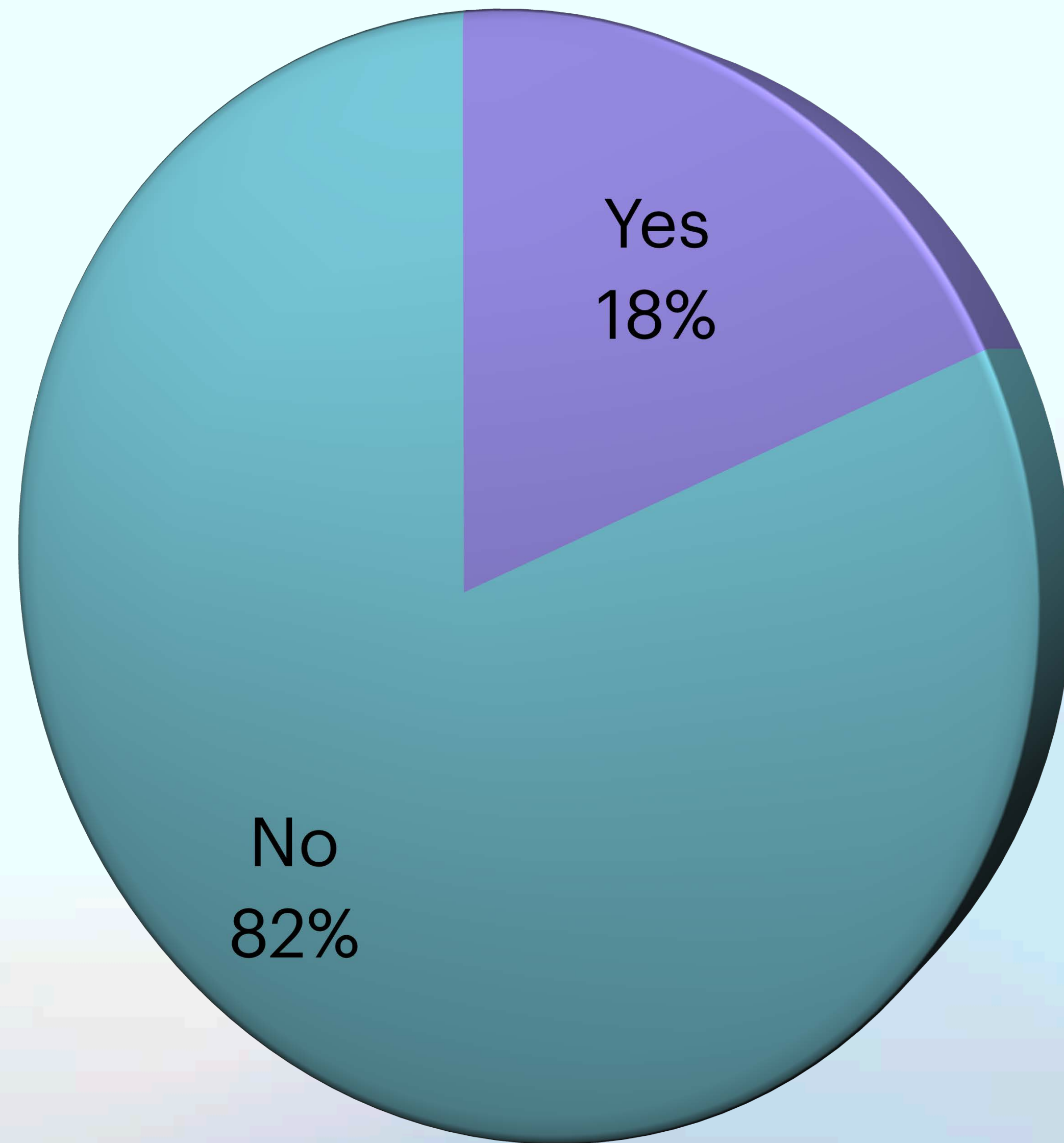


Priests

Talk About Death?

During Catechism

“Was death discussed during your catechism?”

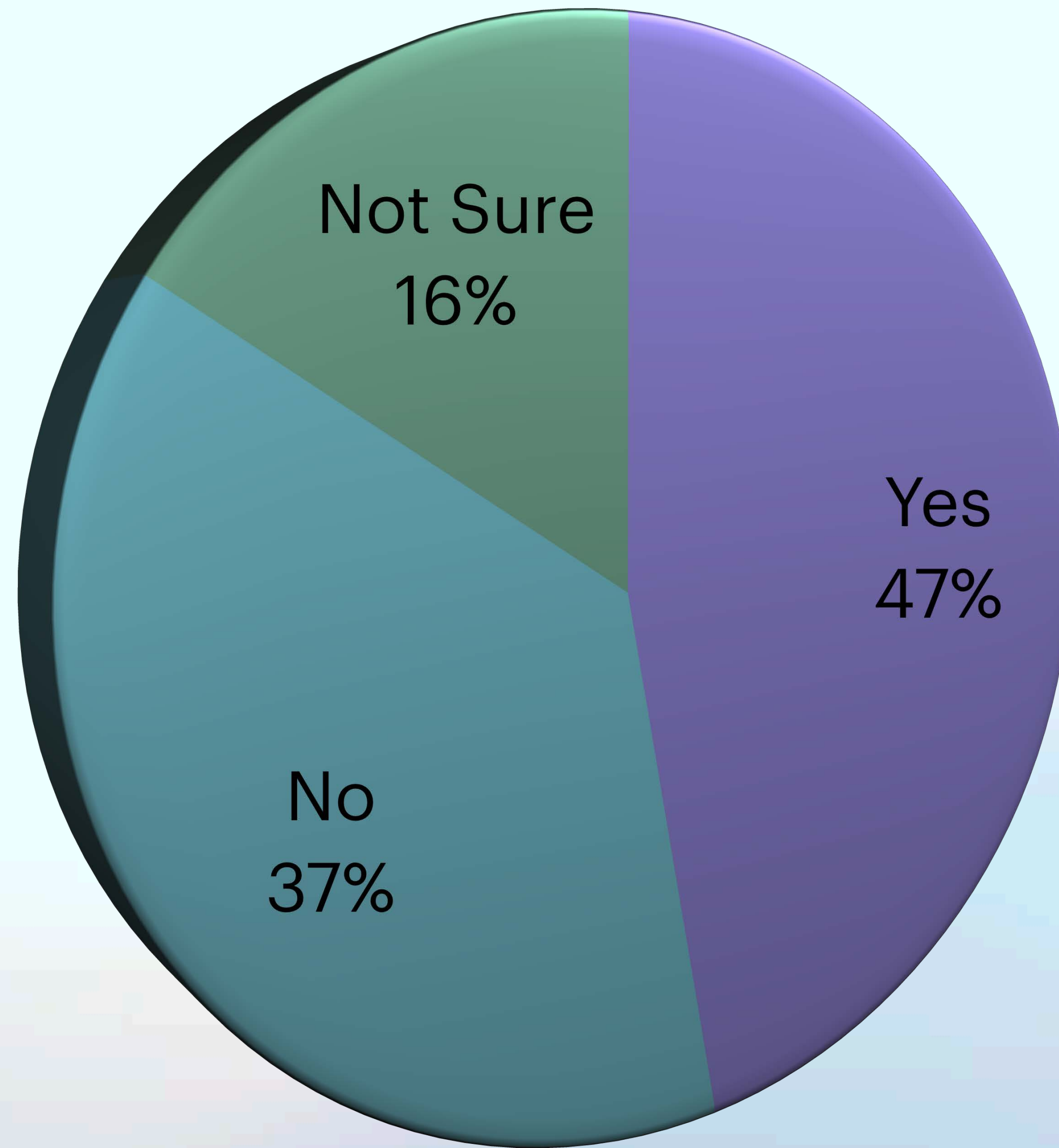


Converts

Views Change?

Post Catechism

“Have your views on death changed since becoming Orthodox?”

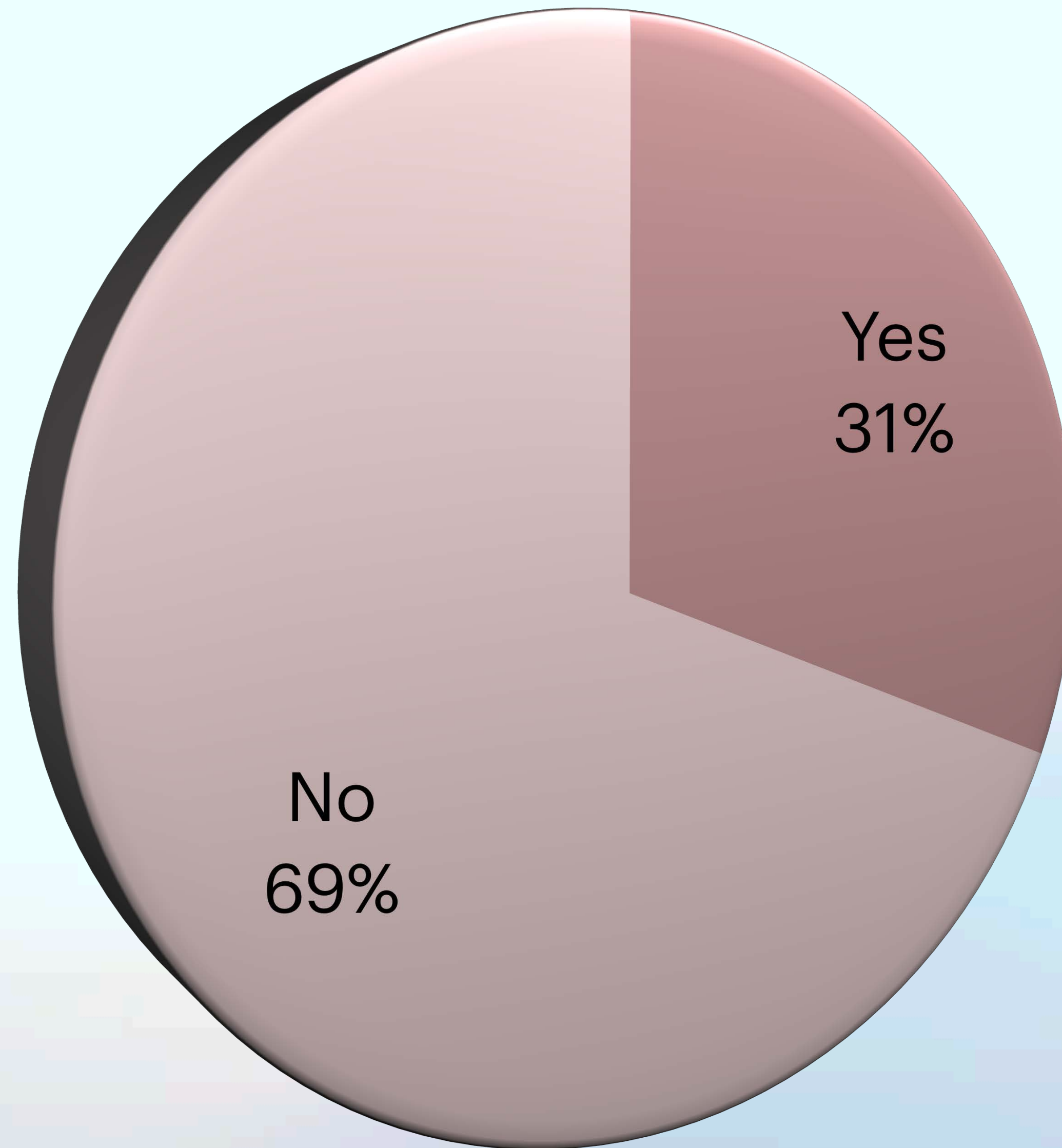


Converts

Fasting?

Post Catechism

"Do you fast on a regular basis?"

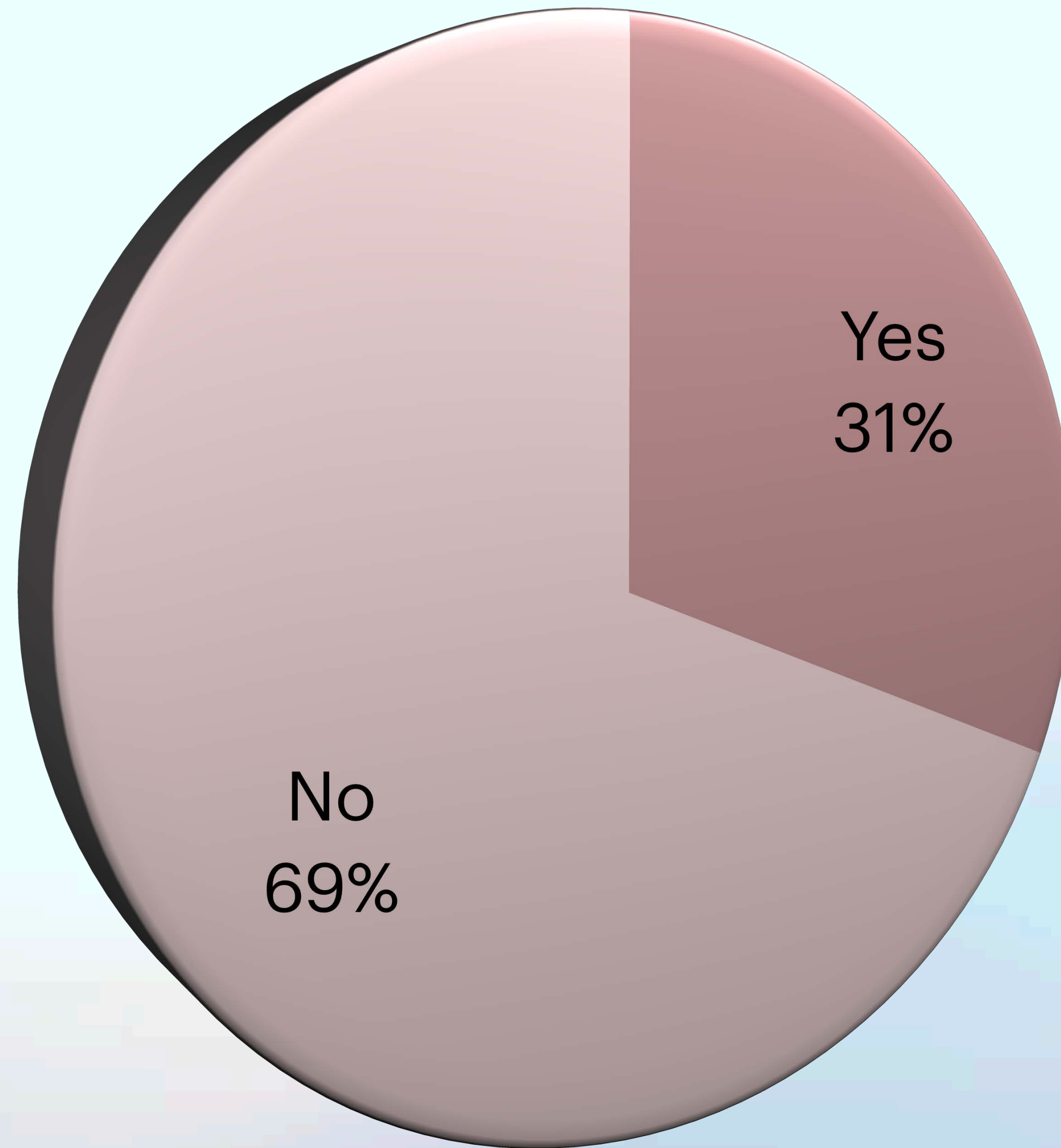


Converts

Missions?

Post Catechism

“Would you ever consider going on a mission trip?”

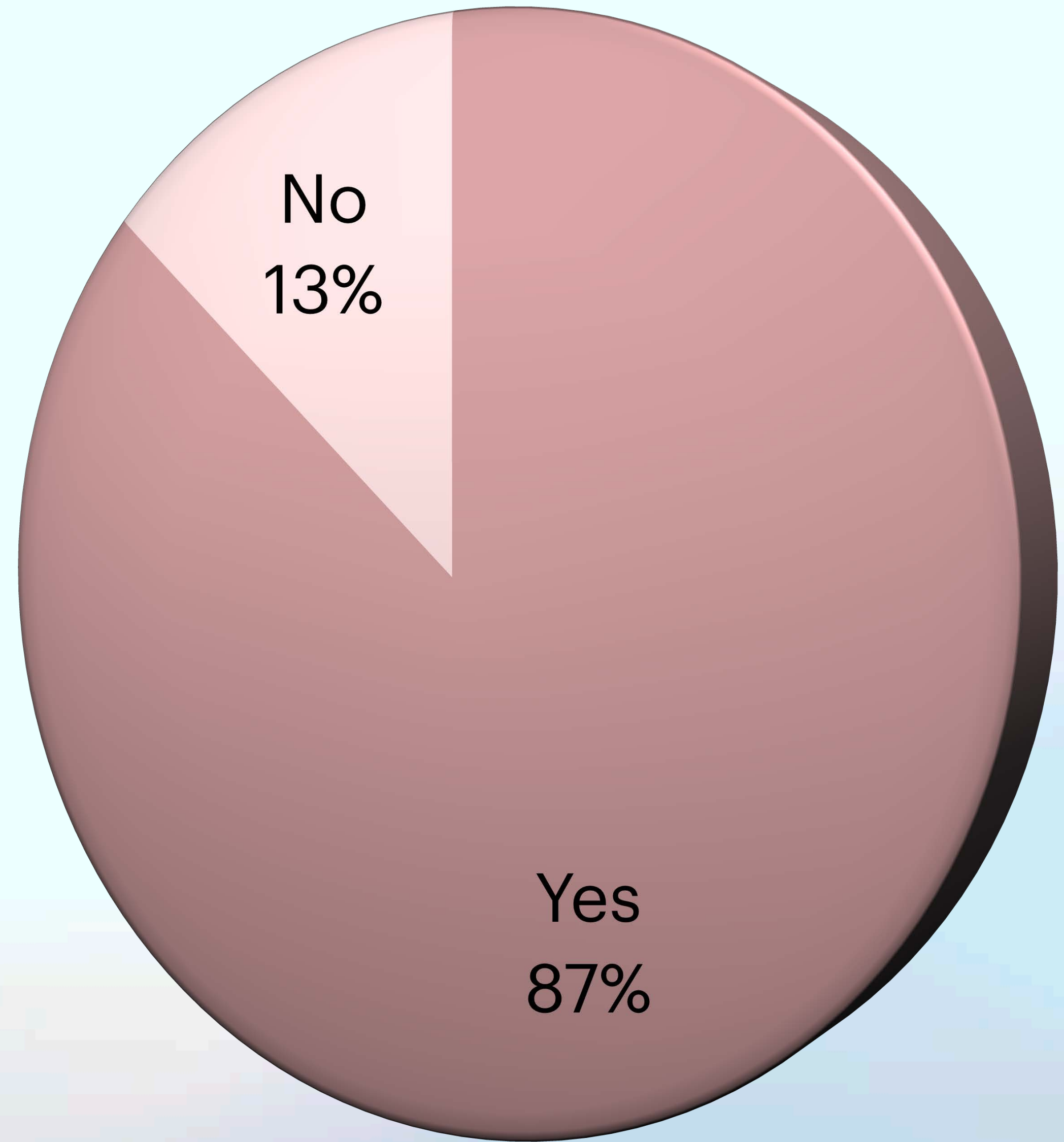


Converts

Deny Faith?

Post Catechism

“Would you deny your faith to save your family?”

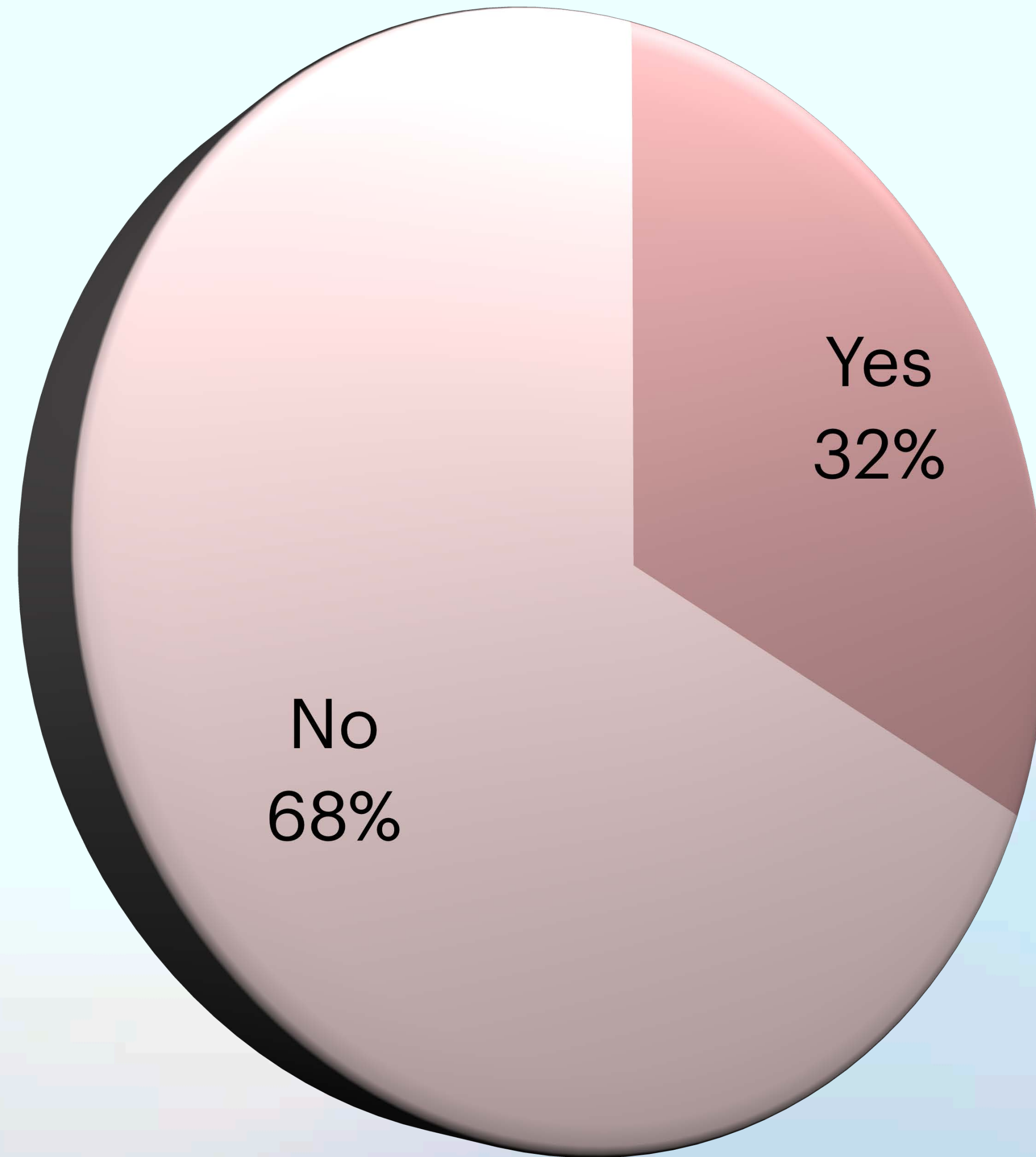


Converts

Martyrdom?

Post Catechism

“Is martyrdom essential for Christian life?”

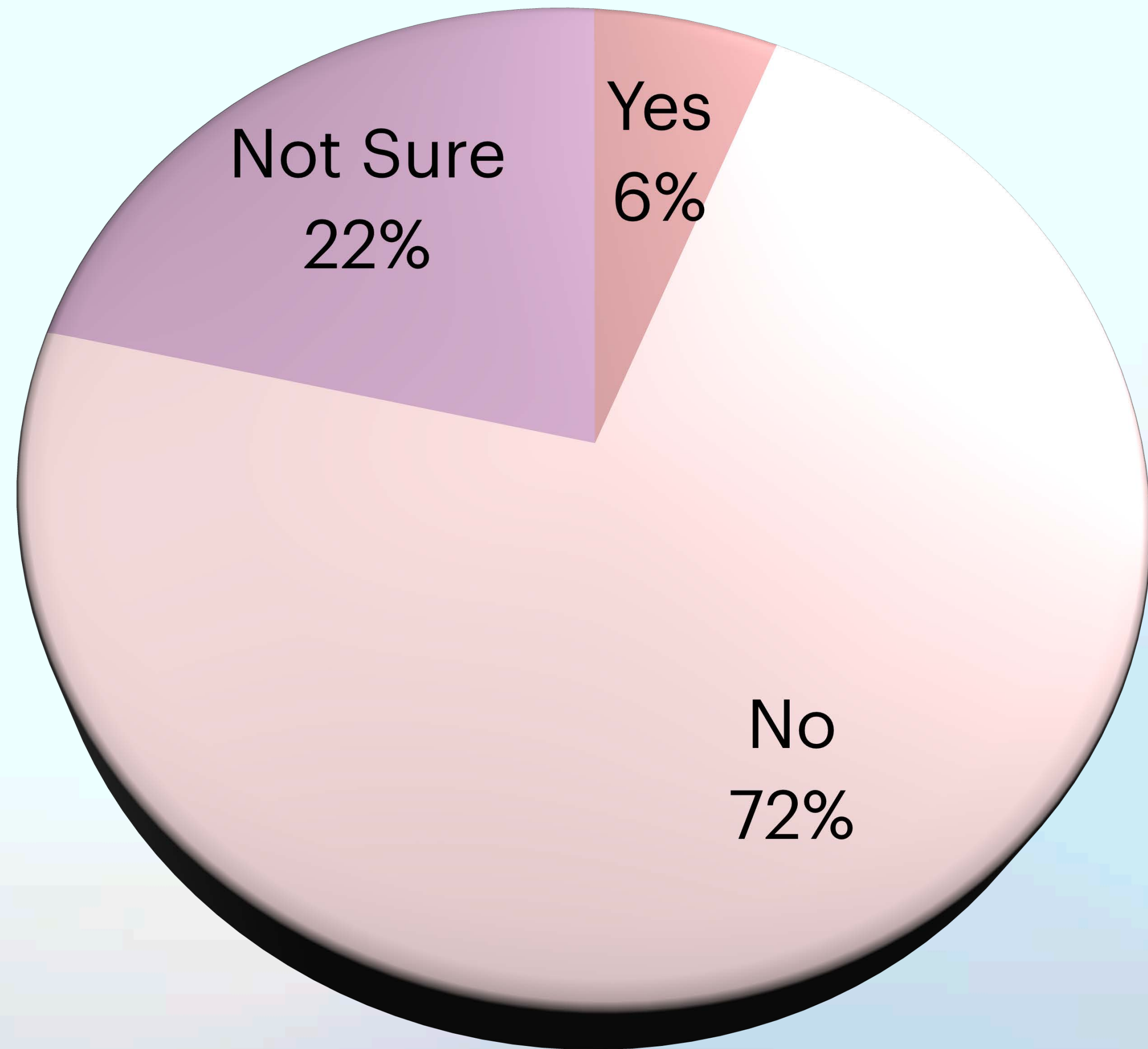


Converts

Martyrdom?

Post Catechism

“Do you consider yourself to be a martyr?”



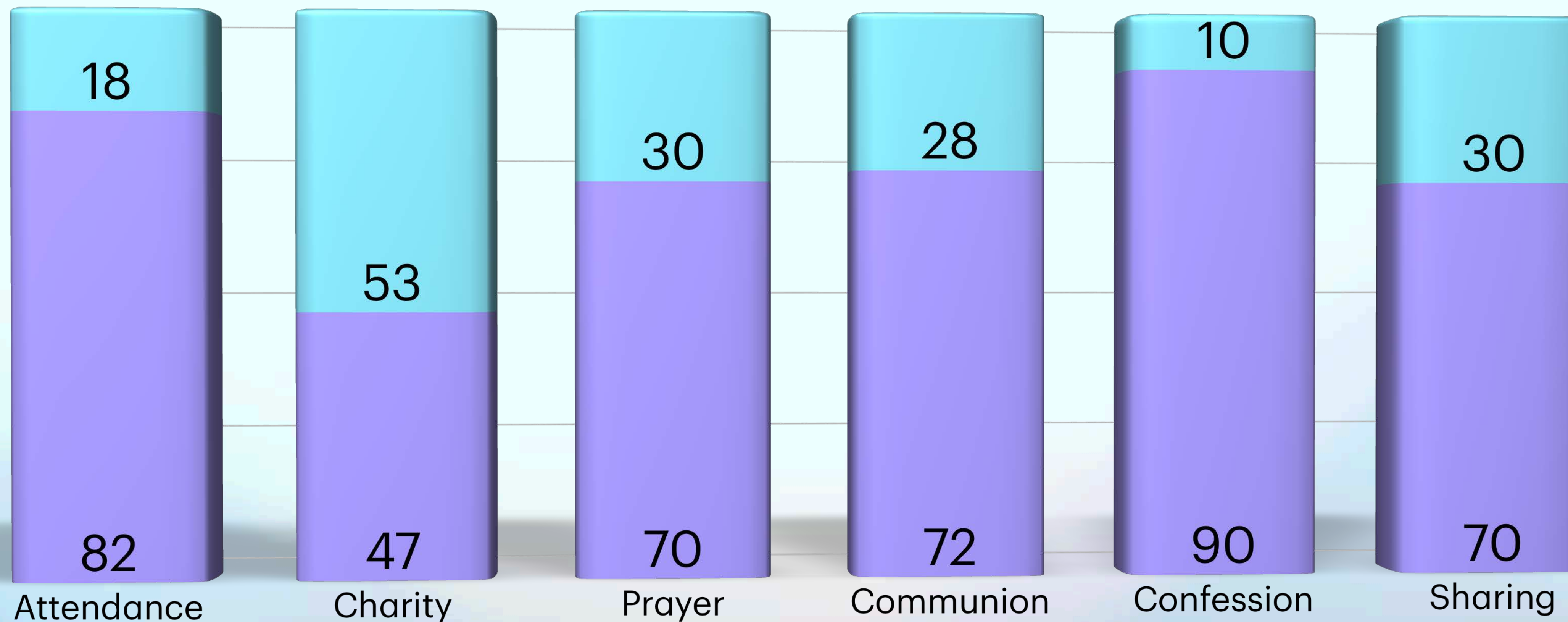
Converts

Life After Conversion

Post Catechism

Rarely

Often

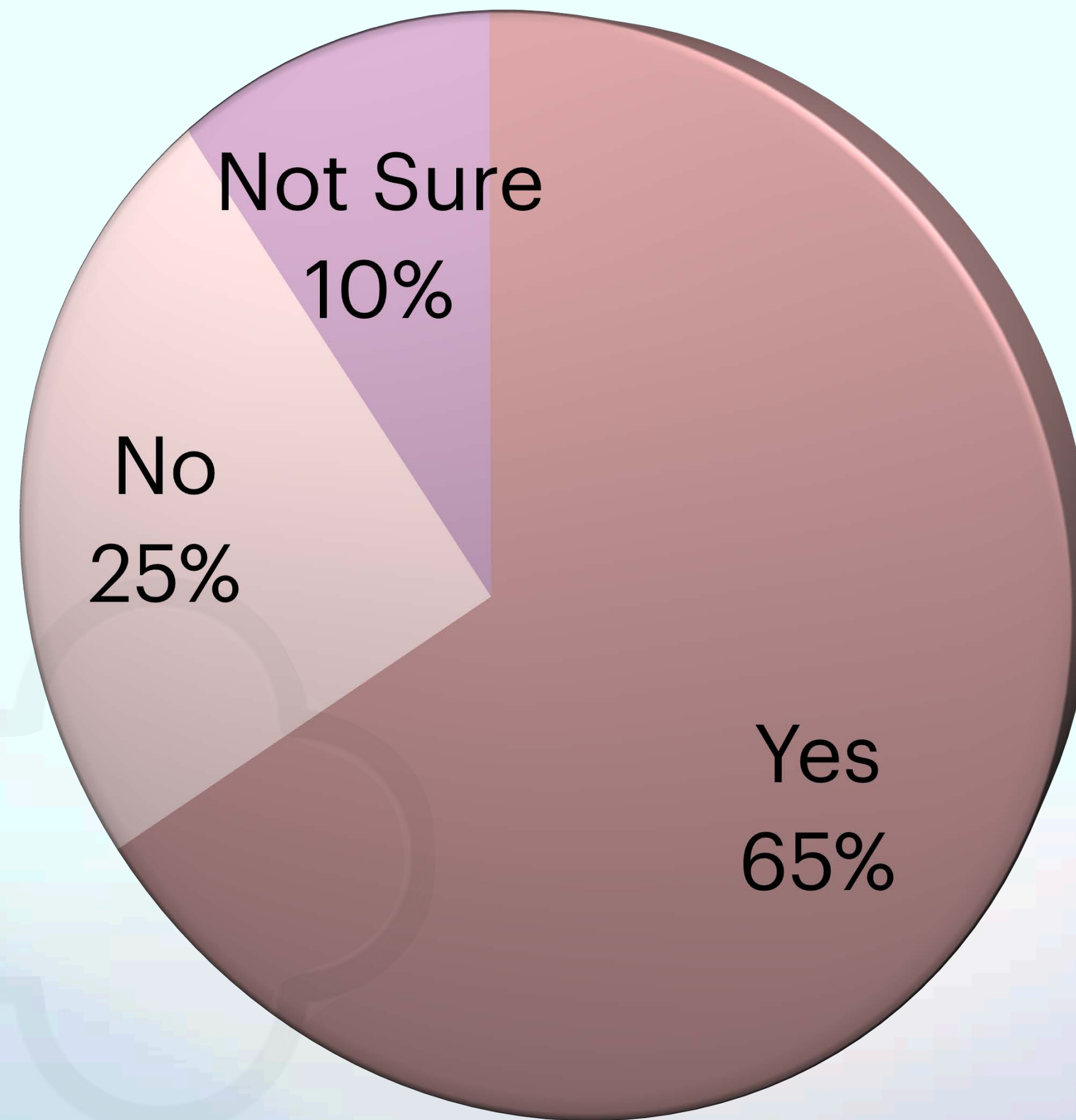


Converts

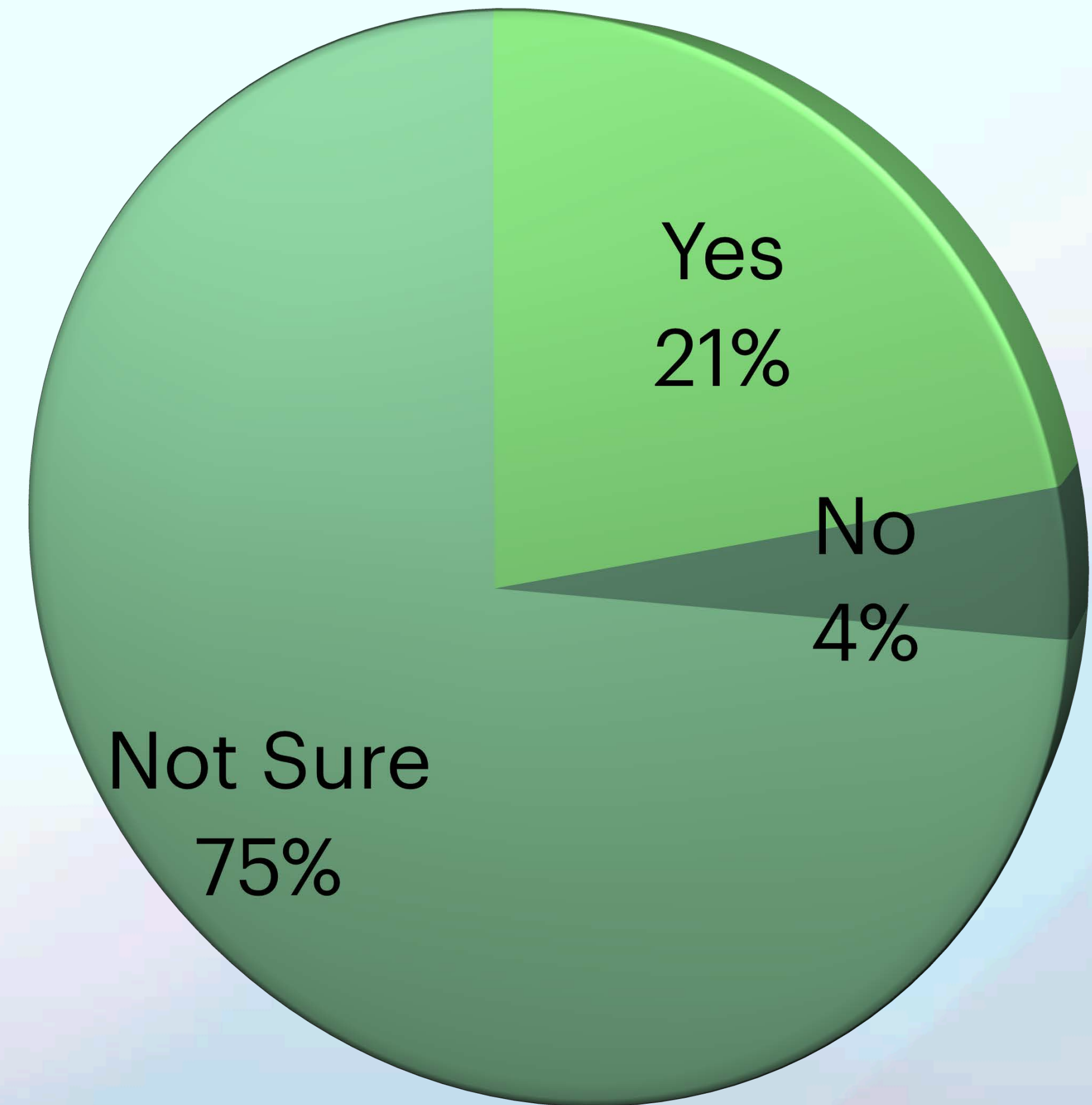
Self-Assessment

Post Catechism

"Are you a good..."



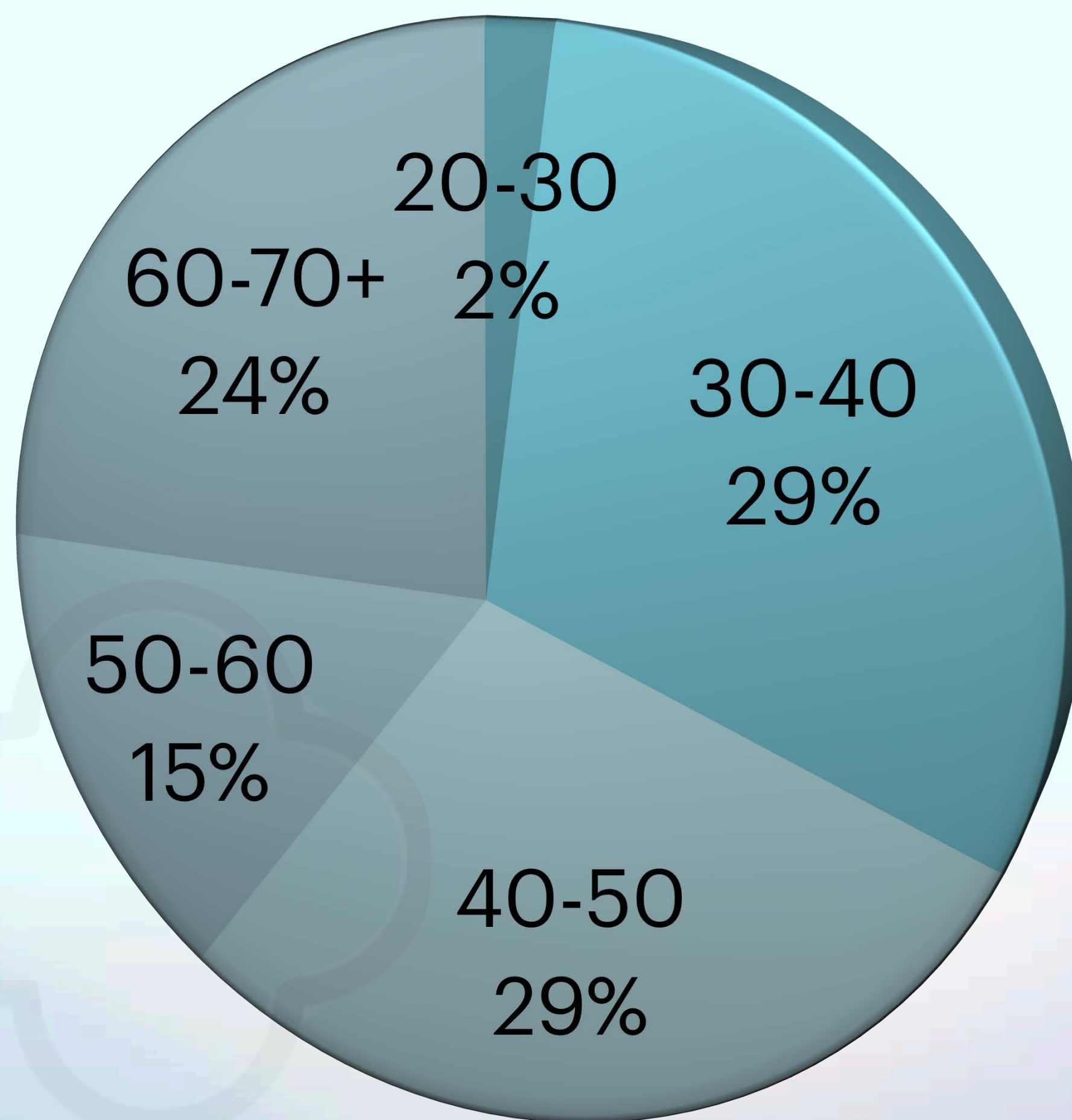
Person



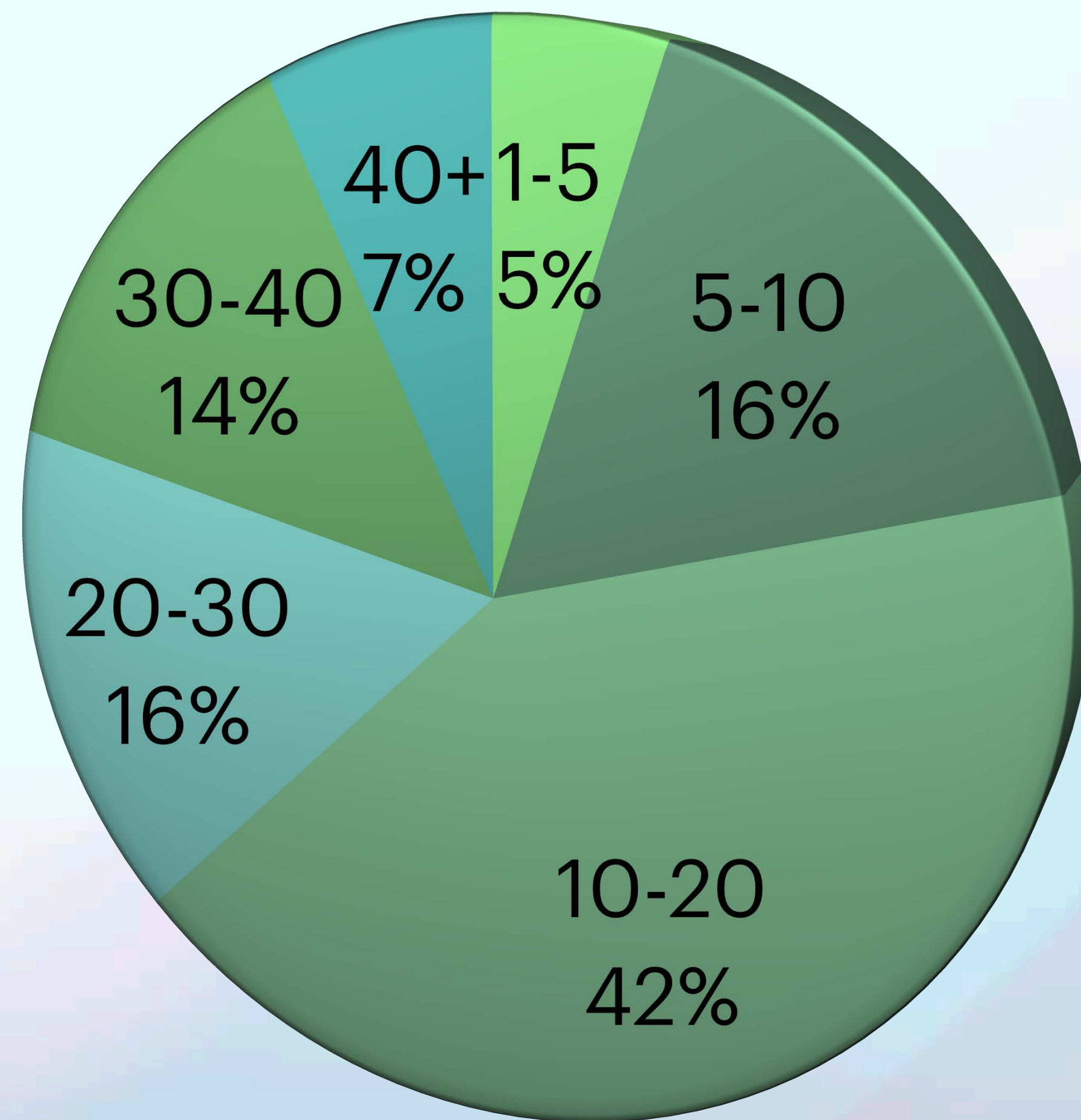
Christian

Clergy Demographics

During Catechism



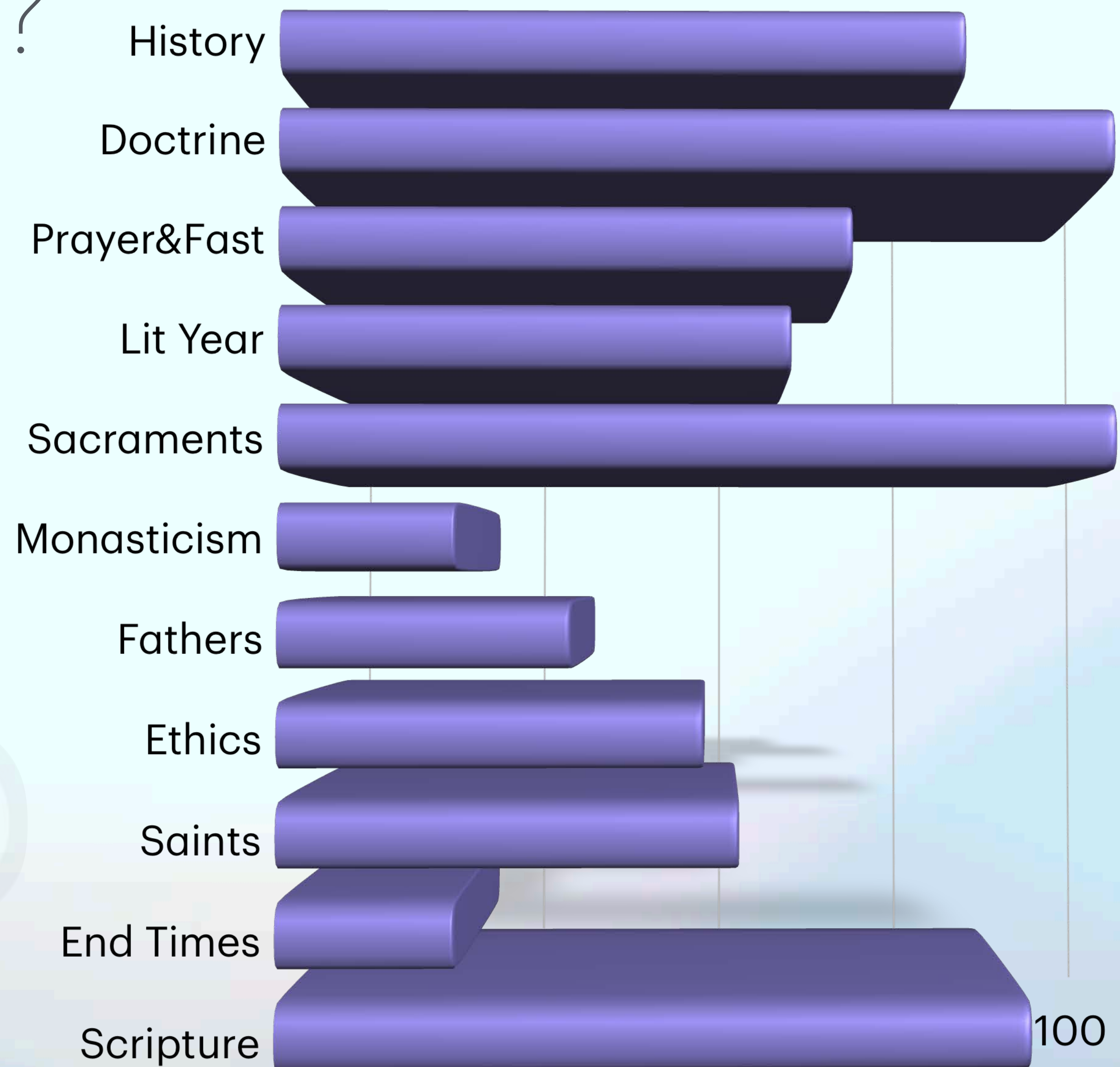
Age



Years Catechizing

What Is Taught?

During Catechism

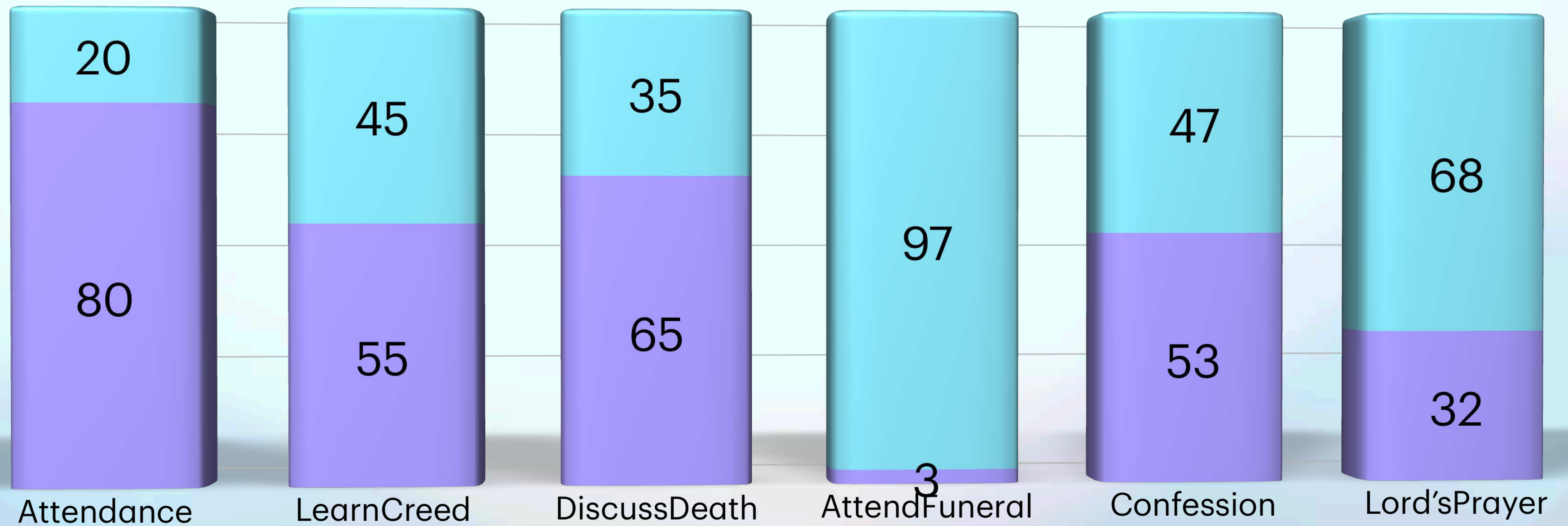


Clergy Expectations

During Catechism

Yes

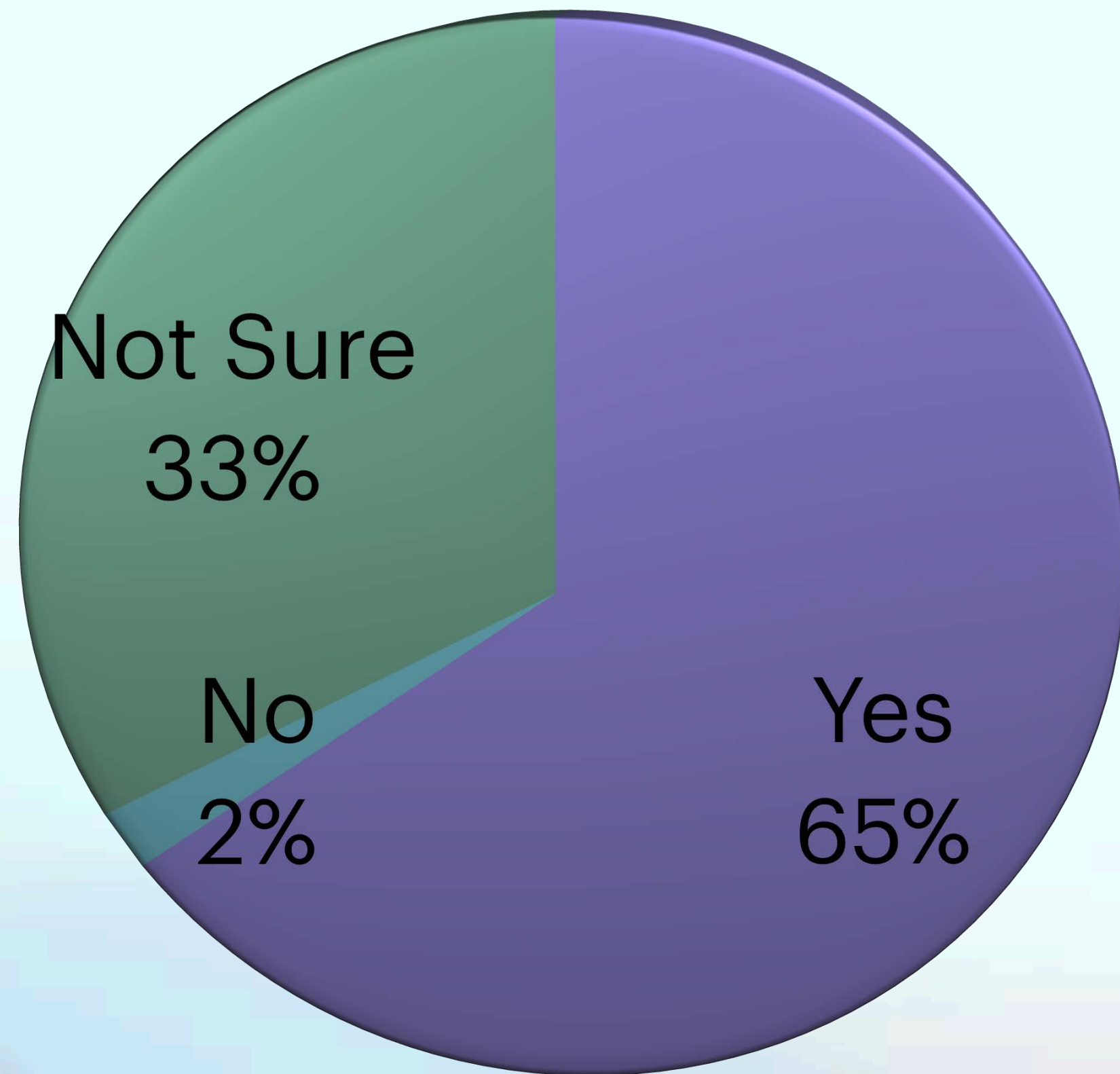
No



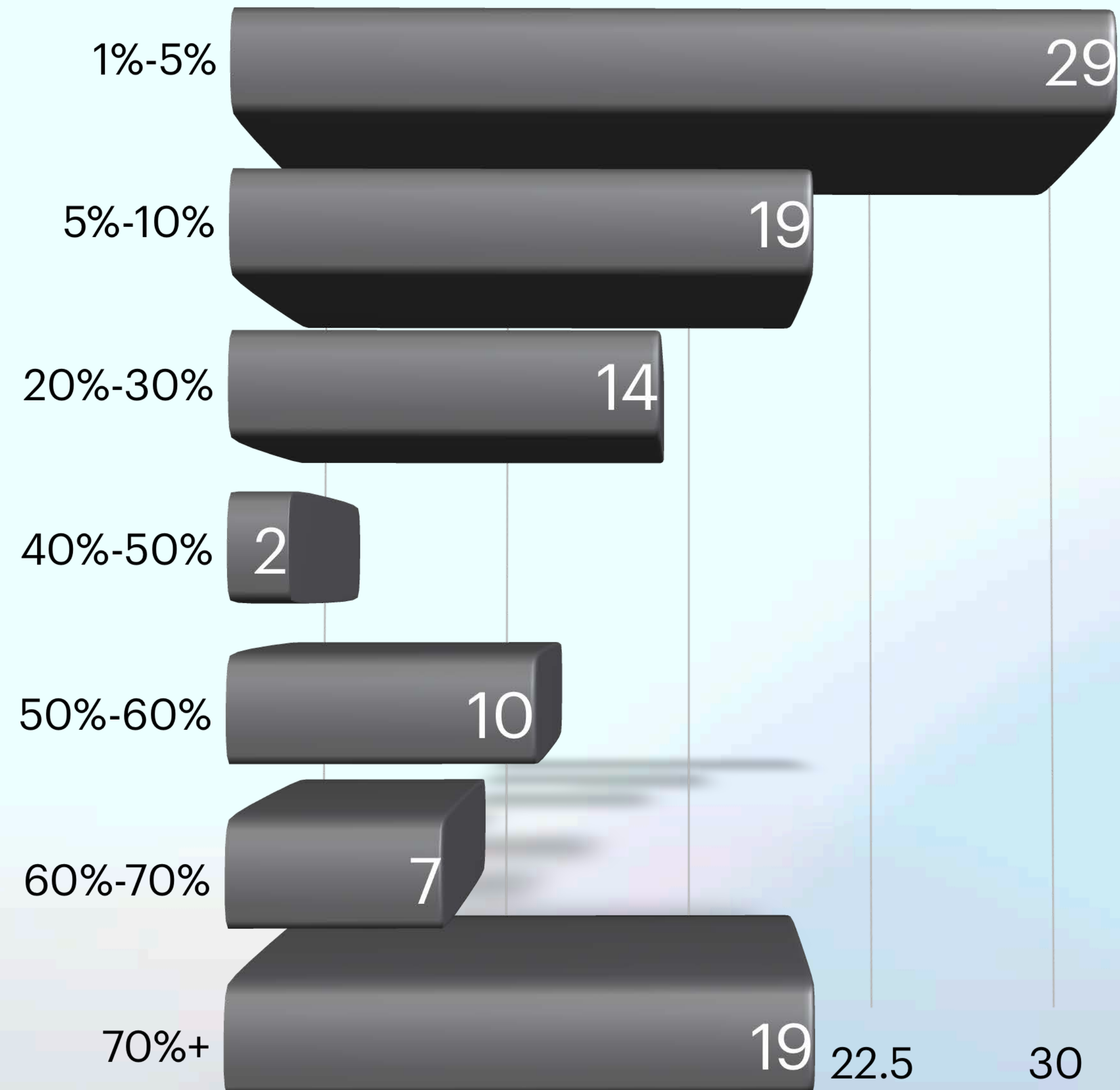
Clergy Expect...

Retention

Post Catechism



“Are you doing a good job?”



What have we learned?

Results

- For a large majority of converts, their mode of existence (the way they live their lives) has not changed following the process of conversion.
- It is evident that most converts do not possess a firm grasp of the Orthodox faith, especially in the areas of eschatology, death and the afterlife.
- There is a clear avoidance of the topic of “death” in the current catechetical approaches surveyed.
- Priests/lay catechists do not spend a sufficient amount of time (mostly less than 3 months) catechizing converts about the Orthodox faith and lifestyle.
- Generally speaking, active participation in one’s home parish life is low.

What have we learned?

Results

- Topics such as “end of life decisions,” “martyrdom,” “funeral and burial practices,” “asceticism,” and “suffering” are not often discussed with catechumens or are a major part of baptismal preparation.
- Most converts are not sure what it means to be a “good Christian.”
- For the most part, converts do not feel a strong call to “take up one’s cross and follow Christ.”
- Most priest/lay catechists do not report a large number of converts staying involved in the Church post baptism.
- Most priest/lay catechists do not identify a problem with the way in which they currently catechize.

Solutions

The Cross

- The cross stands as the symbol of Christ's sacrificial love and redemption for humanity. Teaching catechumens about the cross allows them to grasp the gravity of Christ's ultimate act of selflessness and forgiveness.
- It helps them comprehend the depth of God's love and the enormous price paid for their salvation.
- This understanding deepens their awareness of the true meaning of discipleship and inspires them to embrace the call to self-sacrifice and service to others.
- Teaching about death not only highlights the temporary nature of earthly existence but also emphasizes the hope of eternal life through Christ.

“The disciples... always stand in the shadow of the cross: We stand stretching ahead towards the coming Christ, looking back to the cross as the last publicly visible image in this world... the ‘Passion,’ understood ‘in accord with the scriptures,’ is the catalyst for reading scripture, and the whole of human existence in history, in a new manner, making everything new.”

- Fr. John Behr, *The Mystery of Christ*

Solutions

Baptism: The Beginning is the End

- Just as Christ died and was resurrected, Orthodox Christian baptism symbolizes believers' identification with His death and resurrection.
- In Romans, Paul writes, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried, therefore, with Him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead, by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life " - Rom. 6:3-4
- It is at one's baptism that this process of "death" begins, ultimately culminating in one's physical death at the end of life.
- Through this sacrament, believers are united with Christ in His death and resurrection, gaining a new perspective on mortality.

Solutions

Confession: Dying to the Self

- Just as Christ died and was resurrected, Orthodox Christian baptism symbolizes believers' identification with His death and resurrection.
- In Romans, Paul writes, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried, therefore, with Him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead, by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life " - Rom. 6:3-4
- This practice allows believers to cleanse their souls and seek forgiveness for their transgressions before departing this earthly life.
- St. John Climacus affirms, "Confession will conceive the hope of the resurrection in you."
- Confession allows for the death of the , the renewal of the mind and the transformation of the individual into being Christ-like.

Solutions

Marriage: Dying for the Other

- In the sacrament of marriage, Orthodox couples are united in this hope, reminding them that death is not the finality but a transformative journey towards a higher existence.
- Central to the marriage service are the crowns, which serve as tangible symbols of the eternal bond between the spouses and their relationship with God.
- The crowns represent the crowns of the martyrs.
- Confession allows for the death of the self, the renewal of the mind and the transformation of the individual into being Christ-like. To die to the self and live for the other.
- Through the crowning ritual, the couple is reminded that their married life is part of a larger spiritual journey to attain eternal life.

Solutions

Funerals: The End is the Beginning

- But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. (1 Thess. 4:13)
- Orthodox funeral services feature a series of rituals that symbolize the journey of the soul after death. The primary purpose is to guide the loved ones of the deceased through the mourning process while reminding them of the deceased's transition into eternity.
- Orthodox priests are required to wear white or golden colors, in order to emphasize the light of the resurrection.
- The deceased is covered with the “savano” or “burial shroud,” which is always white linen, and sometimes has the icon of the resurrection printed on it.
- “Kolyva” (boiled wheat), are prepared and sprinkled over the body of the deceased, over the gravesite and even passed out during memorials for people to consume.
- “Truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only one seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds,” (John 12:24)

Conclusions

- The importance of catechumens accepting death through the study of the sacraments of the Church cannot be overstated.
- A sacramental approach to catechism provides Christian converts with a profound awareness of the power of community as a conduit by which they can receive God's grace.
- Such a unique contemplation, and call to participation, awakens within the believer the transformative power of God's grace and the promise of eternal life.
- The task of the catechist is to help form the individual into an image of Christ – one that is willing to “take up his cross and follow Him.” (Matt. 16:24)
- If one were to use advertising language, one could even call it a “tough sell.”
- However, this is the one and only path that has been bequeathed to mankind by the Saviour. “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” (Matt. 16:25)

Conclusions

- Therefore, dying is not only a physical reality but rather a mystical one. In dying with Christ, death becomes a salvific event.
- This transformative understanding enables catechumens to move beyond the fear and uncertainty surrounding their current lives, while embracing the Church as a gateway to eternal life through communion with their Creator.
- It is the path by which one can perhaps, in their final hours, echo the words of St. Ignatius of Antioch who said, “that I may not merely be called a Christian, but really found to be one.” (Letter to Romans Chapt. 3)

Thank You

