Baptism trends in Ireland

SUMMARY

The Iona Institute asked Catholic dioceses around the country to provide us with their most recent baptism figures plus those from 10 years ago to examine trends. Almost all dioceses responded and the results are in the table below.

Looking at the whole island of Ireland, the number of baptisms has declined by 29.6pc in ten years. The decline in Dublin archdiocese has been much more dramatic at 40pc. Taking Dublin out of the equation, the number of baptisms has declined by 26.1pc, island-wide, over the last decade.

But on the island as a whole, births have fallen by 18.8pc over the same period. They fell by 17.9pc in the Republic, and 21.3pc in the North.

Aside from the large decline in births, the other factor behind the fall in baptisms is the rising share of the population that is secular. Around 60pc of the fall in baptisms is accounted for by declining births and the rest is accounted for by rising secularism.

Baptism trends: Diocese by diocese results

Diocese	2015	2025	Change	% change
Achonry	408	395	-13	-3.2%
Ardagh and Clonmacnois	1,217	890	-327	-26.9%
Armagh	3,915	3,089	-826	-21.1%
Cashel & Emly	1,424	1,140	-284	-19.9%
Cork & Ross*	3,713	2,859	- 854	- 21.1%
Cloyne	2,363	1,655	-708	-30.0%
Clonfert	531	435	-96	-18.1%
Derry	3,422	2,531	-891	-26.0%
Down & Connor	4,647	2,884	-1,763	-37.9%
Dromore	1,357	1,151	-206	-15.2%
Dublin	15,759	9,465	-6,294	-39.9%
Elphin	903	911	+8	+0.9%
Ferns	1,907	1,418	-489	-25.6%
Galway, Kilmacduagh & Kilfenora	1,569	1,131	-438	-27.9%
Kerry	1,775	1,380	-395	-22.3%
Kildare & Leighlin	3,898	2,838	-1,060	-27.2%
Killala	540	395	-145	-26.9%
Killaloe	1,794	1,482	-312	-17.4%
Kilmore	947	686	-261	-27.6%
Limerick	1,948	1,491	-457	-23.5%
Meath	4,675	2,768	-1,907	-40.8%
Raphoe	1,400	1,250	-150	-10.7%
Tuam	2,009	1,586	-423	-21.1%

*Cork & Ross figures relate to 2013 and 2023

WHAT EXPLAINS THE DECLINE?

The decline in the number of baptisms over the last ten years is very predictable. But the number cannot be taken in isolation. Some observers, looking at the 29.6pc island-wide decline in baptisms in the last decade might put it mainly down to secularisation, but the biggest part of the decline is accounted for by a fall in the number of births overall.

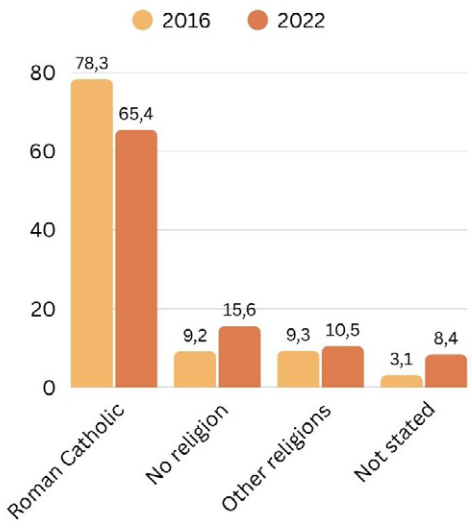
However, the effect of secularisation has been very significant, as we will see. The number of people who says they belong to no religion (the so-called 'nones') has been rising fast. We should also note the growing number in the population who belong to non-Christian religions, although they would not have been having their children baptised anyway. Many of this group will be immigrants.

The next table shows the number of children aged 0-4 by religion in the Republic. We look at this cohort because it gives the strongest indication of the religion, or non-religion, of the youngest group of children in the country as

at Census 2022. For comparison purposes, we also look at the figure for Census 2016.

Religion of 0-4-year-olds (Republic by %)

Religion	2016	2022	Change
Roman Catholic	78.3%	65.4%	−12.9
No religion	9.2%	15.6%	+6.4
Other religions	9.3%	10.5%	+1.2
Not stated	3.1%	8.4%	+5.3



Religion of 0-4-year-olds (Republic by numbers)

Religion	2016	2022	Change
Roman Catholic	258,559	191,571	-66,988
No religion	30,501	45,764	+15,263
Not stated	10,136	24,613	+14,477
Other religions	30,816	30,849	+33
All 0-4 children	330,012	292,797	-37,215

As we can see from the above figures, the big majority (65.4pc) of children aged 0-4 are still marked down as Catholic by the person who filled out the Census form for their household in 2022, even though there had been a considerable fall overall in this category (-12.9pc) since 2016. The next biggest category is children marked down in the Census as belonging to no religion followed by children who belong to other religions.

Note that there was quite a big fall (-37,215) in the number of children aged 0-4 in 2022 compared with 2016. Note also the much bigger fall in the number marked down as Catholic and the big increase in the number who were marked down as belonging to no religion.

Nonetheless, the figures for 0-4-year-olds confirm that the decline in baptisms is accounted for by a decline in births and the rise in the number of those belonging to no religion.

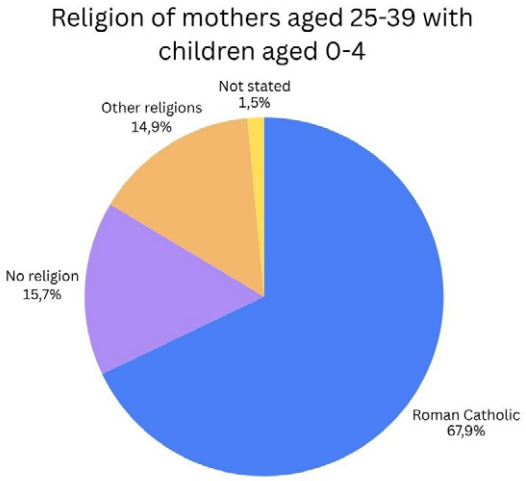
WHAT PERCENTAGE OF CATHOLICS ARE STILL HAVING THEIR CHILDREN BAPTISED?

We can only look at Census data, because only the Census asks people to mark down their religion, but it seems the vast majority of parents who identify as Catholic still have their children baptised.

As we have noted, 65.4pc of children aged 0-4 were marked down as Catholic in Census 2022. This corresponds very closely to the percentage of mothers aged 25-39 who identified as Catholic in that year.

Religion of mothers aged 25-39 with children aged 0-4 (Republic)

Religion	2022
Roman Catholic	67.9%
No religion	15.7%
Other religions	14.9%
Not stated	1.5%



CULTURAL CATHOLICISM AND BAPTISM

Catholics tend to have a 'mix and match' attitude towards the sacraments. They are still having their children baptised, but many Catholic couples no longer marry in church. Many now marry in hotels. (We dealt with this in a previous paper called 'The rise of New Age weddings in Ireland: how should the Churches respond?')

> **But then we see that many of these same couples who marry in hotels, still want their children to make their First Holy Communion and Confirmation.**

In Ireland, it is simplistic to say that the number of church weddings is in decline simply because of secularisation. If this was the biggest explanation, then why do many so many of the same couples who marry in a hotel, get their children baptised, and have them make their First Holy Communion and Confirmation?

> **Clearly, a sort of 'cultural Catholicism' is still quite strong in Ireland.**

The relative popularity of baptism means that hostility to the Church might not be as widespread in the population as can sometimes be assumed. No one who is very anti-Catholic would have their child baptised.

Amarach polls commissioned by The Iona Institute last year (2025) showed that roughly a third of the population have a negative view of the Church, a third have a positive view, with a third in between. If anti-Catholicism extended beyond the one-third, then we should see far fewer people seeking baptism for their children. In addition, the recent Department of Education survey about the sort of primary schools parents want for their children would have shown far more demand for divestment. The third in the middle who have no strong feelings about the Church are probably mostly 'cultural Catholics'.

CONCLUSION

The fall in the number of baptisms in a ten-year period has been dramatic, but it is vital to set this against the background of a big fall in the number of births, which is obviously going to have a very big effect on the island going forward.

The rest of the fall, as we have seen, is accounted for by a rise in the number of people who say they don't belong to any religion. However, as almost all parents who consider themselves to be Catholic still have their children baptised shows that 'cultural Catholicism' still remains quite strong in Ireland.

It remains to be seen what happens to baptism numbers if and when 'cultural Catholicism' fades as a force in Irish life.

THE CASE OF DUBLIN

The boundaries of Dublin city and county, and Dublin archdiocese, are not the same. Some of the archdiocese spills into other counties. But even allowing for this, a big majority of the population of Dublin archdiocese is in Dublin city and county.

As we have seen, the number of baptisms in Dublin archdiocese has fallen by 40pc in ten years, much higher than the average for the island as a whole.

One reason for this is that births have fallen more in Dublin city and county than in the Republic as a whole between 2015 and 2025, that is by 21.9pc versus 17.9pc over that period.

A second big reason for the difference between Dublin and the island as a whole is that Dublin has a higher percentage of children marked down in either the 'no religion' category.

In the Republic as a whole, according to Census 2022, 15.6pc of children aged 0-4 belong to no religion, and 10.5pc belong to a religion other than Catholicism. The numbers for Dublin were 21.9pc and 14.4pc respectively.

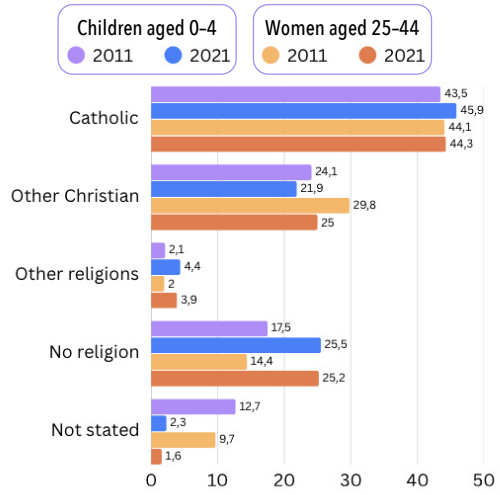
> **In Dublin city and county, 21.9pc of young children belong to no religion**

So, the more secularised nature of Dublin explains most of the difference between it and the rest of the country.

THE CASE OF BELFAST

Belfast is part of the diocese of Down & Connor. Baptisms in Down & Connor are down by 37.9pc. We do not know how much they have fallen in Belfast, but we can surmise that they have declined by more than in the rest of the diocese.

Data from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency figures (Census 2021) show that in Belfast a quarter of children aged 0-4 were marked down as having no religion, as were a quarter of women aged 25-44.



Belfast: Religion Comparison, 2011–2021 (percentages)

Group	Religion	2011	2021	Change
Children aged 0–4	Catholic	43.5	45.9	+2.4
	Other Christian	24.1	21.9	−2.2
	Other religions	2.1	4.4	+2.2
	No religion	17.5	25.5	+8.0
	Not stated	12.7	2.3	−10.4
Women aged 25–44	Catholic	44.1	44.3	+0.2
	Other Christian	29.8	25	−4.8
	Other religions	2.0	3.9	+1.9
	No religion	14.4	25.2	+11.2
	Not stated	9.7	1.6	−8.1

The big increase of no religion in the number of children aged 0-4, and among women aged 25-44, explains a lot of the fall in Catholic baptisms in the city. Presumably this is also affecting baptisms in other Churches.