

## **Will Crimea Vote To Leave Ukraine and Join Russia?**

And, Pope Francis gains popularity in his first year as head of the Roman Catholic Church. But his popularity appears to have had little effect on former Catholics in the United States | As It Is

Hello, and welcome to As It Is from VOA Learning English!

I'm Christopher Cruise in Washington.

Today on the program, we report on the growing popularity of Pope Francis. Some people are calling this "The Francis Effect." Whatever it is called, it does not seem to have caused many former Catholics in the United States to return to the church.

"We can be so focused on our sanctuary, our buildings, and wait for people to come to us."

But we begin our program today with a report about the situation in Crimea. The local government has called a special election on whether Crimea should declare its independence from Ukraine. But Russian and pro-Russian troops are in control of the area. And those who want Crimea to remain part of Ukraine say that means the vote will not be fair.

“The most cynical thing in history is when people have to make a choice under the gun, when they are afraid about their children, their family.”

We report on the referendum in Crimea, and the popularity of Pope Francis today on As It Is.

## **Crimea To Vote On Independence from Ukraine**

The government in Crimea is moving forward with plans to hold a referendum on whether or not to break ties with Ukraine and join Russia. The vote is set for Sunday. Crimean voters have a choice between joining Russia or re-establishing the 1992 constitution and Crimea’s rights as an autonomous republic of Ukraine.

Jonathan Evans reports.

Crimea has a long history with Russia. The majority of the population is ethnic Russian. However, some people believe the vote will not be fair. The area is under the control of Russian and pro-Russian forces. Earlier this week, Crimea’s prime minister swore-in members of the new Crimean Special Forces. They have

since joined the pro-Russian self-defense groups. The prime minister says they are needed for increased security before the voting.

Russia says none of its forces have left its bases in Crimea. But groups of unidentified vehicles have been seen moving around the peninsula. Many observers believe these vehicles belong to the Russian military.

Refat Chubarov is a leader of Crimea's Tatar minority group. He is fearful that the Crimean people are being forced into making a decision.

"The most cynical thing in history is when people have to make a choice under the gun, when they are afraid about their children, their family."

Ukrainian leaders have condemned the planned vote. They say the referendum violates Ukraine's self-rule and should not be recognized as legal. Ukraine's Western allies agree with the country's leaders.

I'm Jonathan Evans.

You are listening to As It Is, from VOA Learning English.

## **“The Francis Effect”**

Pope Francis became leader of the Roman Catholic Church about a year ago. Since then, his simple way of living, and his warmth and openness, have made him popular worldwide.

Some people have called this “The Francis Effect.” His actions and words have reportedly influenced former Catholics to return to churches in some countries. But studies show that his popularity has had little effect in the United States.

The US has the fifth-largest Catholic population in the world. But people who identify themselves as former Catholics represent 10 percent of America’s population. Many former members say they are angry about the Church’s failure to investigate and punish cases of sexual abuse by clergy over the years. Others criticize what they believe is the firmness of Church teachings.

Some Catholic churches are making changes to try to bring former Catholics back to the faith and to try to persuade others to join the church.

One of those churches is The Church of the Nativity, in Timonium, Maryland -- a community near the city of Baltimore. From the outside, the church looks like many other religious centers.

But inside, it is very different. A seven-person band performs as part of the religious service. People can watch the service on large television screens inside the building or in the church's cafe.

The Church of the Nativity is well-known because of a book called "Rebuilt." One of the writers -- Father Michael White -- is head of the church. He and church members have found new ways to fill the church. His book tells how he persuaded local Catholics to return to services.

Studies show that 33 percent of Americans who were born into the Roman Catholic faith have left it. But leaders of the Church of the Nativity believe they have found the secret to winning back former Catholics. That "secret" is a service that some people say sounds like a rock music show.

Church of the Nativity leaders say they have borrowed some ideas from huge Evangelical Protestant churches. Such churches

are often called megachurches because they have so many members.

Tom Corcoran worked with Father White to write "Rebuilt." Mr. Corcoran says criticism of the non-traditional ways is not uncommon. He says some people compare the religious services to food products with the richest fillings removed.

"I think if you want to do anything worth doing, you're going to get criticized. And people aren't going to understand you, and that's just part of the deal."

Rev. John Conley is a professor at Loyola University Maryland. He says Catholics pay too much attention to less-than-important issues.

"We can be so focused on our sanctuary, our buildings, and wait for people to come to us."

Pope Francis has told Catholics that they must look outward. He suggests that they might take up methods that have gained large membership for other churches.

The Church of the Nativity still holds to the basics of its religious service, called a “Mass.” Some parts of it are in Latin.

A woman named Cathy McErlean recently became a Roman Catholic. She says the comparative lack of formality at the Church of the Nativity attracted her.

“It was a lot less intimidating than a more traditional Catholic environment.”

Still, many former Catholics in the United States have not responded to a welcoming Pope or approved of changes in the service. They have not returned to the faith. They still criticize what they see as the severity of the Church’s teachings. And they still condemn the damage done by the Church’s failure to act against sexual abuse by priests.

And that is our program for today. It was based on reports from VOA reporters Elizabeth Arrott in the Crimean capital Simferopol and Jerome Socolovsky in Timonium, Maryland.

I’m Christopher Cruise. I hope you will join us again tomorrow for another As It Is, here on The Voice of America.

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## **Contact information for VOA Learning English:**

Postal address:

**VOA Learning English  
Room 3400  
330 Independence Ave SW  
Washington, DC 20237  
United States of America**

Email us at: [LearningEnglish@VOANews.com](mailto:LearningEnglish@VOANews.com)

Or go to our website -- [learningenglish.voanews.com](http://learningenglish.voanews.com) -- and click  
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