

CATHOLIC LEAGUE SURVEY OF CATHOLICS

Bill Donohue

Editor's note: Survey research is an area of study pioneered by sociologists. This explains why Bill Donohue made recommendations and crafted some of the questions. He has a Ph.D. in sociology from New York University.

Introduction

Over the summer, the Catholic League commissioned a survey of Catholics. It was undertaken in anticipation of the media surveys that are likely to precede the Holy Father's visit to the United States. In addition to the usual questions, we probed issues that the media generally ignore. We also dug deeper, seeking a more comprehensive examination of Catholic attitudes and beliefs. Please feel free to distribute our findings to interested parties.

Methodology

In the first week of August 2015, The Polling Company, headed by Kellyanne Conway, conducted a nationwide scientific survey of 1,000 Catholics. They were randomly chosen from telephone sample lists, using both landline and cell phones.

Sampling controls ensured proportional representation of Catholic adults, drawn from such demographic data as age, gender, race and ethnicity, and geographic region. Data were weighted slightly for age and race. The findings are accurate at the 95% confidence interval, with a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1%

Findings

Role of Catholicism

Respondents were asked about their religious formation; they were given several sources to select from, and could choose from more than one. Childhood lessons were identified by 56% of the sample, while teachings from Catholic schools were cited by 45% of those questioned. What was most striking was the finding that 70% of those who spent 11+ years in Catholic schools cited education as a primary source of Church teachings.

When asked to choose from a list of characteristics about what constitutes a good Catholic life, the majority chose "living an honest and moral life" and "helping your neighbor." African Americans, 59%, and widowers, 63%, were more likely to choose the latter.

Roughly 68% of Catholics say their commitment towards their faith has not been altered in any significant way in the recent past. Those who are the most educated tended to feel the most excited about or committed to their Catholic faith; those who rarely attend Mass were the least excited.

A staggering 95% of Catholics say their faith plays a significant role in their everyday lives. When it comes to the impact that their faith has on their political decisions, 69% reported that their Catholicism matters. Nearly half of Catholics, 48%, believe that if more people practiced the teachings of the Catholic Church, our society would be better off. Those who attend Mass more than once a week, 72%, are the most likely to agree with this proposition.

Pope Francis, the Bishops, and the Media

Pope Francis has received much media attention, so almost everyone has an opinion of him. The findings show that 83% of Catholics approve of the overall job that he has done. He gets his highest approval ratings from African Americans, 93%, and those who have a post-graduate education, 92%. Similarly, 79% say that he has changed the Church for the better, drawing more support from women than men.

Catholics would prefer that the bishops stick mostly to internal Church matters; 64% feel this way and only 27% think they should address public policy. But the more a Catholic attends Mass, the more likely he is to say the bishops should speak out more about policy issues.

When it comes to the pope, however, things are different. Indeed, a plurality want to hear his voice: 48% prefer that he speak to public policy matters; 45% say he should address mostly internal Church concerns.

Respondents were asked about their reaction to media coverage of papal events. "During the previous Pope's visit to the United States, Pew Research found that during the week of Pope Benedict's visit, over half of the news coverage on the Pope focused on the clergy sex abuse scandal. Knowing this, do you think that the media coverage is mostly fair or mostly unfair toward the Catholic Church?"

Nearly six in ten, 58%, said that the media coverage was mostly unfair; 34% said it was mostly fair. Those in the West and Midwest were more likely to say coverage was unfair as compared to those from the South and Northeast.

One of the issues that the Catholic League has been quite critical about over the years is the media habit of including non-Catholics in polls about Catholicism. That is why we had pollsters ask respondents if they had ever heard of a survey that asked non-Jews and non-Muslims if they agree with the teachings of Judaism or Islam. Not surprisingly, 90% said they never heard of such a poll.

Media bias shows up in ways that are independent of papal visits. Pop culture, of course, plays a role in the public's perception of Catholicism. By a margin of 52% to 39%, respondents agreed that "Gay couples receive more respectful/favorable treatment in popular culture like books, TV and movies than do Catholic figures like priests and nuns."

Catholic Church Teachings

The media are obsessed with issues of sexuality when writing about the Catholic Church. Too often, in their surveys, they ask simple "yes or no" questions, thus eliciting information that is not particularly useful. We allowed for a more nuanced approach.

Abortion is one of the most contentious issues of our time. Our survey found that roughly four-out-of-five Catholics at least partly accept the Church's teachings on abortion.

To be specific, respondents were asked if they agree with the Church that "all life is sacred from conception until natural death, and the taking of innocent human life, whether born or unborn, is morally wrong."

"I accept part of this teaching but not all" was the response of 39%, and 38% said, "I accept this teaching completely." Conservatives and those with 11+ years of Catholic education were more likely to subscribe to the Church's teaching.

When asked to identify themselves as either pro-life or pro-choice, 50% said they were pro-life and 38% said they were pro-choice. But it appears that even among those who say they are pro-choice, few are zealots.

For example, 17% said abortion should be prohibited in all circumstances; 17% said abortion should be legal only to save the life of the mother; and 27% said abortion should only be legal in cases of rape, incest or to save the life of the mother. That's 61% who are mostly pro-life.

Among those who are pro-choice, only 5% said that abortion should be allowed for any reason and at any time; 4% said any reason was okay but there should be none after the first six months of pregnancy; and 17% said abortion should be legal for any reason, but not after the first three months of pregnancy. That's 26% who are mostly pro-choice.

Another way of looking at it is to consider how many are happy with current abortion law. In the U.S., abortion is allowed for any reason and at any time; we have the most liberal abortion laws in the world. The survey data yield an impressive finding: if only 5% agree with current law that means that 19 out of 20, or 95%, of Catholics disagree with the status quo.

When it comes to marriage, 58% believe it should be between a man and a woman only; 38% do not agree. Those from the Northeast are the most liberal on this issue; frequent church-goers are the most conservative.

On the subject of women priests, 58% say they agree that the Church should ordain women as priests; 36% disagree (African Americans and those widowed were the most likely to disagree). Even though a majority are okay with women priests, the data indicate that what is being measured is more of a preference than a demand: just 35% say they agree strongly that women should be priests. Which means that two-thirds either oppose women's ordination or it doesn't mean that much to them.

In fact, this last interpretation of the data may be too generous. It is not at all uncommon for people to be conflicted: on the one hand, they want the Church to change certain teachings; on the other hand, they admire the constancy of Church teachings.

Unfortunately, in the black-and-white world of the media, there is no interest in probing the respondent's conscience. This may make for good commentary, but it lacks a scientific basis.

Here's an analogy I often use when speaking to the media. If asked if I would prefer "God Bless America" to the "Star Spangled Banner" as our national anthem, I would choose the former. That's my preference. But am I going to get exercised about if there is no change? Of course not. Similarly, when Catholics are asked whether they want the Church to change its teachings on certain subjects, they may say yes, but few are prepared to take to the streets over it.

It is because of these concerns that I crafted a question to get right to the heart of this issue.

Respondents were asked if the Catholic Church should "remain true to its principles and not change its positions," or should it "change beliefs and principles to conform to modern customs?" The majority, 52%, agreed that the Church should not change; 38% disagreed. It is likely that some of those who are okay with women priests also admire the steadiness of the Church's teachings. This becomes even more apparent when the issue of the conflicted Catholic is teased even further.

Here is the actual question, and the responses, that address this issue:

- 31% I differ with the Catholic Church's position on some issues but the Catholic Church shouldn't change its beliefs or positions just because of public opinion
- 28% I agree with most every position the Catholic Church takes and the Catholic Church should remain true to its principles and not change its position
- 26% I differ with the Catholic Church's position on some issues and the Catholic Church should modernize its beliefs by changing its position to reflect current public opinion
- 9% I disagree with most every position the Catholic Church takes and the Catholic Church should absolutely change its positions to reflect modern day beliefs
- 2% None of the above
- 4% Don't know; cannot judge

This data indicate that 6-in-10 Catholics want the Church to stay true to its principles; only 35% want it to conform to modern culture. Again, this suggests that many of those who might differ with the Church on women priests, or some other issue, also prefer a Church that doesn't change with the winds of the dominant culture.

By the way, this is nothing new. In a 1995 survey of Catholics, commissioned by the Catholic League, we asked an almost identical question. It yielded practically the same results.

Religious Liberty

By a healthy 2-1 margin, Catholics support laws that protect religious liberties. To be exact, 63% oppose compelling private businesses to provide services that violate their religious beliefs; 30% are not opposed. When asked specifically about forcing wedding-related businesses to provide services like taking photos or baking cakes for same-sex marriage if it violates their religious beliefs, 62% say it is mostly unfair; 29% say it is fair.

Similarly, 60% agree that "Religious freedom laws are only meant to protect religious freedom, and the threat of these laws is exaggerated by the media and allies." Only 32% believe that "Religious freedom laws are worrisome and could be used by businesses to discriminate based on sexual orientation."

Respondents were also questioned about the Health and Human Services mandate. They were asked if they agree or disagree with the federal government forcing Catholic organizations "to pay for health care coverage that covers contraceptive drugs, including those that can destroy a human embryo, even if it is against their religious beliefs?" Fully 68% disagreed; only 27% agreed.

Conclusion

It is entirely legitimate for survey researchers to question Catholics about their religion, probing their beliefs and attitudes. But when non-Catholics are asked to pass judgment on Church teachings and/or no attempt is made to distinguish between practicing Catholics and non-practicing Catholics, the results are ineluctably skewed towards a more critical outcome. This explains why the Catholic League survey was conducted: we sought a more accurate picture of the status of Catholicism today.

Please feel free to distribute the findings to all interested parties.