

# CATHOLIC LEAGUE'S SURVEY OF AMERICAN CATHOLICS

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Surveys of American Catholics abound, so why is there a need for another one? Because those who have commissioned such surveys haven't asked all the right questions, that's why. It's not as though those who have done the polling have been incompetent or dishonest, it's just that, for a variety of reasons, they haven't seen fit to ask the kinds of questions that the Catholic League would like to see answered.

Surveys of Catholics have been done for good, honest intellectual reasons and for pure, unadulterated ideological reasons. Those who have done the former type of research have a heuristic interest in contributing to sociological research. But it is not epistemology that drives the latter group, it is politics. This is not to say that those who are interested in changing the political culture of the United States necessarily produce methodologically tainted polls. Most, clearly, do not. On the other hand, it is true that *some* of those who have a political interest in survey research have indeed "cooked" the data. Let me explain.

There is no denying that some of the earliest polls conducted of American Catholics were done not only for political purposes, they were done dishonestly. To be specific, beginning in 1971-two years before *Roe v. Wade*-the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) began planning its "Catholic strategy," the purpose of which was to discredit the Catholic Church. According to Dr. Bernard Nathanson, who at that time was chairman of the Medical Committee of NARAL as well as a member of the Executive Committee, NARAL's arsenal included "fictitious polls and surveys designed to make it appear as if American Catholics were deserting the teachings

of the church and the dictates of their consciences in droves." Indeed, he reproduces memos from early NARAL meetings to buttress his point.

Things have changed somewhat since the 1970s (there are no more fictitious polls), but what has not changed is the desire of pundits to paint a picture of American Catholics that is sharply at odds with the Vatican. How many times have we heard that many American Catholics do not accept certain Church teachings, setting up the familiar conclusion that unless Rome changes with the times, American Catholics will walk away from their church. That relatively few have walked down the block to the nearest Episcopal church seems to be overlooked. More startling, it is precisely those religions that have become most assimilated to the culture that have lost the greatest number of the faithful.

It is for these reasons, and others, that the Catholic League decided to commission a scientific poll of its own. The firm of Fabrizio, McLaughlin and Associates is a well respected survey research organization. In February, 800 Catholics 18 years and older were sampled. They were selected from every major demographical grouping, and were weighted in accordance with their proportionate national distribution. For example, there are more females than males in the population and there are more Catholics living in the Northeast than anywhere else in the nation. Our survey reflects these distributions.

It is often said that it is impossible for a small selection of the population to be an accurate gauge of the American populace. As a sociologist who is trained in survey research, I can say without equivocation that survey research that is methodologically sound can indeed provide for a fairly accurate picture of the population it seeks to study. What it provides may only be a snapshot, but if survey research is done properly, it can be of enormous value.

This is not the place to explain how survey research is done,

but it can be said that in this survey, there is a very high degree of probability that if every Catholic over the age of 18 had been questioned, the final tally would differ by no more than 3.5%, plus or minus, from the answers reported here. There is nothing exact about this, and polls can certainly be given far more weight than they deserve, but, if they are methodologically scientific, they should not be dismissed willy-nilly.

## **THE FINDINGS**

There are several related issues that this survey tried to tap: (a) the extent to which American Catholics disagree with some of the official teachings of the Church (b) the identity of those Catholics who are most likely to disagree (c) the degree to which disagreement affects commitment to the Church and (d) the level of support that Catholics, and especially parents, give to those Church teachings that directly address moral conduct.

Given that most men and women are waiting longer to marry these days, it is understandable that only 5.7% of young people (18-25) have received “all” the sacraments (for obvious reasons, “all” means baptism, penance, Eucharist, confirmation and matrimony). However, an impressive 68.6% have received baptism, penance, communion and confirmation. Overall, 60.5% of adult Catholics have received all the sacraments.

In contrast to some other surveys, we found that a majority of Catholics, 51.8%, attend Mass once a week or more. Indeed, 68.2% attend once a month or more, while 20.5% go once or several times a year; 10.4% never go to Mass. Of those who have received all the sacraments, 77.7% attend Mass once a month or more, versus 52.4% who have only been baptized. Senior citizens (those 65 and over) go much more often than young people, e.g. almost 80% of seniors go once a week or more (79.7%) compared to only 29.6% of young people.

When asked what is it that people like most about the Catholic religion, the top ten answers were:

1. Tradition
2. Everything
3. Mass
4. Community/Togetherness
5. Attitude/Belief
6. Comforting/Familiar
7. Principles/Values
8. Teachings
9. Faith
10. Sacraments

When asked what is it that people like least about the Catholic religion, the top ten answers were:

1. Inflexible
2. Prohibit Use of Birth Control
3. Too Many Requests for Money
4. Pro-Life Position
5. Priests Can't Marry
6. Close-Minded
7. Confession to a Priest
8. Has Become Too Contemporary
9. Divorce Stand
10. Hypocritical Policies

Judging from the first list, it appears that faith and community are the two qualities that Catholics find most appealing about their religion. But if it is tradition that Catholics value most it is the underside of tradition, namely inflexibility, that leaves other Catholics cold. Notice, however, that the third most disliked element of Catholicism-too many requests for money-is non-ideological. More revealing is the multidimensionality of the complainants: there are those who think the Church has become too contemporary (#8), as well as those who think it isn't contemporary enough.

Interestingly, those who listed confession to a priest (#7), tended to be the two oldest segments of the population (56-65 and 65 and over). This says something positive about the changes that were made in recent years regarding Reconciliation. Not in the top ten were complaints about the role of women in the Church. "Catholicism does not treat women as equals" finished twelfth, and the complaint that "women can't be priests" was fourteenth on the list.

Only 38.8% think the Church is unfairly criticized by the media on social issues, while 48.6% think the reporting is fair. However, those who are the most disaffected from the Church are also the most likely to see media criticism as being fair. For example, those who go to church once a month or more are split on the issue, with 44.6% saying the media are fair and 43.3% saying they are unfair. But among those who don't go to Mass at all, the breakdown is 51.8% fair and 26.5% unfair. Similarly, those who think the Church should change its beliefs, as opposed to those who think it should stick to its founding principles, look more kindly on media criticism: for the former group, the breakdown is 64.4% fair and 25.6% unfair, but for the latter group, the difference is 40.8% fair and 47.6% unfair. It makes sense that those who are most critical of the Church are also the most indulgent of media criticisms of it.

"When, in your opinion, the Catholic Church is unfairly criticized by the media, who should respond on behalf of the Church?" Almost 7 in 10 (68.8%) say both lay and clergy, while 13.6% say it should be the clergy only; 5.1% preferred the laity to speak up but not the clergy. This is good news for the Catholic League, and indeed it is good news for all lay Catholic organizations: most Catholics want the laity to respond to unfair attacks on Catholicism. We hope not to disappoint them.

**How Much Change Should a Religion Experience?**

What kind of religion do Catholics want? One that follows public opinion, or one that sticks to its founding principles? The results of table 1 are as follows.

### Table I

Generally speaking, in your opinion should a religion change its beliefs and principles to conform to the modern day opinions of its members or should a religion stick to its founding principles and beliefs?

1. Change to conform to modern day opinion of its members.....	33.8%
2. Stick to its founding principles and beliefs.....	51.8%
3. Neither (VOLUNTEERED).....	1.8%
4. Both (VOLUNTEERED).....	9.9%
5. Don't know/Refused.....	2.9%

There is a significant difference between those who regularly attend Mass (once a month or more) and those who never go to church. Among the regulars, 56.5% want the Church to stick to its principles while only 28.4% prefer keeping up with the times. But even among the no-shows, a plurality prefer the Church to stick to its founding principles, by a margin of 45.8% to 41%. Men are more likely than women to prefer constancy to change: for men, the split is 55.8% versus 29.5%, while for women it is 47.9% versus 37.8%.

In every age group, support for holding the line dominates the voices of change, including, by the way, young people: 54.3% of those aged 18- 25 say stick to founding principles and 30.5% say the Church should change to conform to public opinion. In fact, those in the 26-40 and 41-55 age brackets want more changes than do young people: 39.5% of the former group and 37% of the latter want the Church to change its beliefs, while 44.4% and 49.8% of the two groups, respectively, want the Church to stick to its principles.

In another question concerning change, respondents were asked what they thought about the pace of change in the Catholic Church. Over the past thirty years, or since Vatican II, 18% said “too many changes and gone too fast”; 32.9% said “too few changes and gone too slow”; and 42.5% said “just about the right amount of changes at the right time.” Of those who think there have been too few changes, 38.6% never go to Mass, compared to 27.3% who go once a month or more. Of those who think there have been just about the right number of changes made at the right time, 50.3% attend Mass once a month or more, compared to 24.1% who never attend. The figures for men and women on this question were almost identical, but not so among the different age groups.

Once again, young people are less likely to say that there have been too few changes than is true for the middle age groups. For example, 30.5% of young people think there have been too few changes, but 38.7% of the 26-40 year olds and 38.4% of the 41-55 year olds feel this way; the older groups are much less likely to feel this way, with 25.8% of the 56-65 year olds and 18.7% of the seniors believing there have been too few changes. Most of those in their middle years are members of the baby boomer generation and many of them experienced the social turbulence of the 1960s. Their experiences seem to have found expression in their restlessness with the Church, but it appears that this discomfort was confined to their cohorts: young men and women are more at home with the pace of change.

Table 2 provides a close-up look at the level of satisfaction with the Catholic Church’s willingness to hold the line.

## **Table 2**

Which of the following statements comes closest to your opinion regarding the church and its position on issues?

1. I agree with most every position the Catholic Church takes

- on issues and the church should remain true to its principles and not change its positions ..... 22.5%
2. I differ with the church's position on some issues, but the church shouldn't change its beliefs or positions, just because of public opinion ..... 39.6%
3. I differ with the church's position on some issues and the church should modernize its beliefs by changing its positions to reflect current public opinion ..... 28.9%
4. I disagree with most every position the church takes on issues and the church should absolutely change its positions to reflect modern day beliefs ..... 4.6%
5. None of the above (VOLUNTEERED) ..... 2.5%
6. Don't know/Refused ..... 1.9%

If we collapse the data from responses 3 and 4, we find that one-third of the respondents think the Church should change with public opinion (33.5%), a figure that dovetails with that found in question # 1 of table 1. Of those whose differences with the Church beckon them to support changes, 45.7% never go to Mass, as opposed to 27.9% who attend regularly (once a month or more). There is a difference between men and women on this question, with 29.2% of the men and 37.6% of the women desiring a more updated Catholic Church. Nonetheless, a total of 66.7% of the men and 57.8% of the women-strong majorities-found agreement in questions 1 and 2. Two-thirds of those who have received all the sacraments prefer a religion that doesn't bend with the wind (67.2%) while only 30.4% express the contrary view.

Table 3 gets down to specifics.

### **Table 3**

Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

14. The Catholic church should ordain women as priests.  
Agree-55.0% Disagree-39.5% Don't know/refused-5.5%



15. The Catholic church should abandon its pro-life position on abortion. Agree-29.0% Disagree-63.6% Don't know/refused-7.4%

16. The Catholic church should ordain married men as priests. Agree-66.5% Disagree-28.1% Don't know/refused-5.4%

17. The Catholic church should abandon its opposition to artificial birth control.

Agree-58.4% Disagree-33.8% Don't know/refused-7.9%

18. The Catholic church should ordain known homosexuals as priests. Agree-27.6%

Disagree-64.9% Don't know/refused-7.5%

19. The Catholic church should abandon its teachings on homosexuality. Agree-31.5%

Disagree-55.8% Don't know/refused-12.8%

On the question of women's ordination, it may come as a surprise to learn that men are much more supportive than women. Six in ten men (59.7%) but only 5 in ten women (50.6%) agree that women should be ordained as priests; 35.9% of the men and 42.9% of the women disagreed.

If this seems surprising, it should be recalled that in virtually every poll that was taken in the 1970s and early 1980s on the subject of the Equal Rights Amendment, it was found that men were more supportive of the ERA than women. Similarly, support for a women's right to abortion has always been more popular with men (especially single men) than with women. What this seems to say, among other things, is that women are somewhat wary of certain status changes, notwithstanding a vocal minority among them who rail against the status quo.

A slight majority (51.2%) of those who have attended to all the sacraments agree with women's ordination, while 42.8% disagree. Of those who attend Mass regularly, there isn't much of a difference, with 48.6% expressing agreement and 45.5% saying no. But among those who never go to church, there is a major difference: 71.1% want the change and only 24.1% don't.

Those who think the Church should change to reflect public opinion are predictably more sympathetic to women's ordination, with 74.8% saying yes and 24.1% saying no. There was a big difference between singles and widowed persons on this question: 63.7% of the singles and 27.4% of the widowed want the change while 32.3% and 62.9%, respectively, oppose women becoming priests.

I will come back to the question of abortion after first discussing the rest of this section of the survey.

There is even greater agreement among Catholics regarding the question of ordaining married men as priests. Indeed, in every category there is support for the right of priests to marry. In fact, even those who go to church once a week or more are prepared to accept the change by a margin of 53.2% to 37.2%.

With regard to the Church's position on birth control, there isn't much difference between the way men and women feel about this issue: 57.4% of the men and 59.3% of the women think the Church should abandon its position, while 35.1% of the men and 32.4% of the women think it should keep the prohibition. There were no significant differences across all the categories, though it is interesting to note that among young people, there is less support for abandoning the Church position's than might be expected: 53.3% prefer a change but a surprising 41.9% say tow the line (this figure was the high- est of any age grouping). As we have already seen, few of these young people are married, so it remains to be seen whether they will change their minds once they think about starting their families.

The data show strong support for not ordaining known homosexuals to the priesthood. Even among those who never go to Mass, 48.2% say the Church should not ordain known homosexuals while 41% counsel otherwise. Seven in ten of those who go to Mass regularly (69.9%) prefer that the Church do not ordain known homosexuals, while only 22.6% think it should.

Men are more likely to say no to homosexuals being ordained than women: 68.7% of the men say no compared to 61.3% of the women; 26.6% of the men and 28.6% of the women would like a change in policy.

Similarly, most respondents do not want the Church to change its teachings on homosexuality. More than any other variable, Mass attendance explains where the support is on this subject. Those who go to church once a month or more want the Church to hold the line, with 58.3% saying no to a change in teachings and 28.8% saying yes. But among the non-church going crowd, 47% want the church to change and 37.3% say no to change.

Abortion may be the most contentious issue of our day. However, it does not follow that there is no consensus of the subject. As table 3 indicates, 63.6% do not want the Church to change its position on abortion while only 29% think it should. The most important determinants of attitude on this issue were Mass attendance and thenumberofsacramentsreceived. Sevenin ten (69.5%) of the regular attendees at Mass think the Church should not change its position while only 22.9% think it should. Among those who do not attend Mass at all, 42.2% are in agreement with the Church's position and 49.4% disagree. Those who have received all the sacraments support the Church by a margin of 68% to 24.4%, but the figures for those who have only been baptized differ widely: 52.4% are in favor of the Church abandoning its position and 47.6% are against.

Table 4 offers a personal look at the subject.

#### **TABLE 4**

Which of the following statements regarding abortion comes closest to your opinion?

1. I am personally opposed to abortion and believe it is wrong for anyone to have one .....22.5%
2. I am personally opposed to abortion, but I believe that in

a few instances it is a choice best left up to the individual.

... .. 40.3%

3. I am personally opposed to abortion, but I believe that in most instances it is a choice best left up to the individual.

..... 19.8%

4. I personally favor abortion and believe it should be available for any individual that chooses to have one ..... 13.9%

5. None of the above (VOLUNTEERED) ..... 1.8%

6. Don't know/Refused ..... 1.9%

By a margin of 2-1, the respondents say abortion is wrong in most cases: by collapsing answers 1 and 2, we find that 62.8% are opposed to abortion in most instances and by combining answers 3 and 4, we find that 33.7% think that abortion is right for individuals to choose in most instances. More than seven in ten of those who attend Mass regularly are opposed to abortion in most instances, with 72.3% expressing this view and only 24.4% expressing the contrary view. 59% of those who never go to Mass say abortion should be an individual decision in most instances while only 31.3% think otherwise. Those who have received all the sacraments track those who go to Mass regularly, with 71.3% in opposition to abortion in most instances. More women than men feel abortion is wrong in most instances: 66.6% of the women and 58.7% of the men feel this way.

Remarkably, even those who think the Church should conform its beliefs to reflect public opinion are inclined to oppose abortion in most instances: the figures are 50.3% versus 45.9% who think it should be up to the individual.

Regarding current laws on abortion, 13.3% think they are too restrictive, 46.8% think they are too liberal and 34.1% say the laws are about right. How often someone attends Mass explains a lot: 10.1% of those who regularly attend Mass and 25.3% of those who never go think that the laws are too restrictive; 54.9% of the regulars and 24.1% of the no-shows say the laws are too liberal; those who think the laws are

just about right split 29% to 42.2% between the church-goers and those who stay at home. While it is true that the older segments of the population are the least likely to support the right to abortion, even among the young 41.9% think the laws are too liberal, which is greater than the 38.1% who think they're just about right and the 14.3% who think they're too restrictive.

### **Does It Really Matter if People Disagree?**

For a very long time now, we have been led to believe that if American Catholics disagree with certain Church teachings, it signals a lack of commitment to their religion. Not so. Just as most marital disputes do not end in divorce, so it is with Catholics who disagree with the Church: most are not about to quit.

Table 5 is quite revealing.

#### **TABLE 5**

If the Catholic church did not change its positions as many have suggested, how would that affect your commitment to the church? Would you be

1. Definitely more committed to the church ..... 9.5%
2. Probably more committed to the church ..... 9.8%
3. As committed to the church as you were before ..... 63.6%
4. Probably less committed to the church ..... 9.0%
5. Definitely less committed to the church ..... 4.8%
6. Don't know/Refused ..... 3.4%

The results to this question are perhaps the most significant in the survey. Not only would almost two-thirds not be affected if the Church didn't change, two in five (19.3%) would be even *more committed* than they were before if change *did not* happen [collapse the first two answers]. The commitment of a mere 13.8% [combine 4 and 5] would be negatively impacted by a failure to change. If we add those

who wouldn't be affected to those whose commitment would be stronger, we find an astonishing 82.9% who would be just as committed, if not more so, if the Church didn't make the changes that many have suggested.

Among those who attend Mass once or more a month, 90.3% would be just as committed, if not more so. Even among those who never go to Mass, the figure is 60.3%. For those who have received all the sacraments, 87% would be just as committed, if not more so. To top it off, 73.3% of those who think that the Church should change its beliefs to conform to public opinion admit that they would be just as committed, if not more so, if the Church refused to change. So much so for the argument that the Church had better tailor its teachings to popular opinion lest it risk losing the faithful.

### **Church Teachings and Moral Conduct**

"Do you agree or disagree that if more people practiced the teachings of the Catholic Church, our country would be better off?" 66.4% agree and 25.1% disagree with this statement. Attendance at Mass and to the sacraments are most important in explaining the different responses to this question. 72.3% of those who attend to Mass regularly agree while 20.7% disagree (the figures are exactly the same for those who have attended to all the sacraments).

Among those who never go to Mass, we find that 44.6% agree and 42.2% disagree. Even among those who want the Church to change its beliefs to conform to public opinion agree that the country would be better off if the teachings of the Church were practiced by more people: 54.8% say yes and 38.9% say no. A clear majority in all age groups agree with the question, and the percent of men and women who agree is 70% and 63%, respectively.

When it comes to the 35.6% of Catholics who have children under the age of 18 (by the way, those who never go to Mass

are the least likely to have children), 92.3% say it is important that their children follow Church teachings on abstaining from pre-marital sex, while only 6.7% disagree. Among those who never go to Mass, the figures are still 80% to 20%.

What about Church teachings on choosing a child instead of having an abortion? Fully 80.4% think it is important that their child follow Church teachings while only 11.6% think it is unimportant. Though the figures are different for those who never go to Mass, 68% to 24%, the pattern is still the same.

72.3% say it is important that their children choose marriage over cohabitation while 24.2% say it is unimportant. Only among those who never go to Mass do we find a contrary view: 44% say it is important and 48% say it isn't. It would be interesting to know what percentage of the no-shows have had children out of wedlock.

## CONCLUSION

In the end, what do we know about American Catholics? The greatest divergence between Catholics in the U.S. and Church teachings is clearly on the subject of married priests. But despite what some pundits would like to make of this, celibacy is not a matter of doctrine, rather it is a discipline that the Church chooses to impose. This is not to say that such a divide doesn't matter, it is just that it doesn't matter as much as some would have us believe.

It makes common sense that those who are most committed to the Church-as witnessed by attendance at Mass and the number of sacraments received-would show up time and again as the most supportive of Church teachings *as they are*. Conversely, those who have shown the least interest in the Church tend to be the most critical of it.

The magisterium of the Catholic Church does not, nor should it, consult the latest Gallup poll to determine whether

certain changes ought to be made. But even if it did, any honest social scientist would have to agree that-after seeing the results of this survey-it would be foolish to listen too closely to those who want the most changes. As we have seen, it is precisely the disaffected who want the most changes.

The rank-and-file are not only not raging for change, they are quite at home with the Church the way it is.

As important as anything in this survey, the level of commitment that Catholics have for their religion is strong enough to override the few differences that separate them from Church teachings. Though most surveys do not indicate this, there is surely a difference between preferences and demands. That most Catholics prefer priests to marry is not the same as saying that most Catholics demand that priests have a right to marry. Many Americans would like to adopt "America the Beautiful" as our National Anthem, yet their patriotism is unaffected by having to stick with the "Star Spangled Banner."

Come late summer and early fall, there will be many occasions to draw on this survey. The U.N.'s Beijing Conference on Women in September and the arrival of the Pope in the U.S. in October will provide lots of opportunities to discuss the so-called divisions between Catholics in the U.S. and the Vatican. It will be most helpful to draw on the results of the Catholic League's survey to help set the record straight.