

JUDGING THE POPE BY THE POLLS

On the day Pope John Paul II celebrates his Silver Jubilee, the results of two new polls on his performance have been released. For the purpose of simplicity, the first poll will be called the USA TODAY/CNN/Gallup poll; the second will be named the Washington Post-ABC poll. Catholic League president William Donohue offered his analysis today:

“Fifty-three percent of Catholics in the first poll, and 62 percent of those in the second poll, say the pope is ‘out of touch’ with the views of American Catholics. Yet 63 percent in the first poll, and 80 percent in the second, approve of his leadership. Indeed, almost 90 percent of Catholics in the second poll (the first did not ask this question) give the pope high marks for ‘preserving the church’s traditions.’ What gives?

“It is too easy to say that Catholics like the pope personally but don’t like some of his teachings. To begin with, there is a strong correlation between Catholics who attend Mass on a regular basis and support for the Church’s teachings. The obverse being true as well, it means little to factor non-practicing Catholics into any survey of Catholics (vegetarians who eat hot dogs at baseball games do not provide insight into the sentiments of vegetarians).

“So what gives? Many Catholics are somewhat conflicted: they admire the pope for being the steady moral anchor that he is while continuing to express some of the more secular values of the dominant culture. What seems not to be understood is that if the pope sought to bring the Church’s teachings more into line with the values of the dominant culture, he would lose the respect of the very same people who voice a desire for change. People respect leaders for doing what is right—not for appeasing their preferences.

“Furthermore, to suggest—as some aging dissidents have—that most practicing Catholics are up in arms over the absence of certain reforms is not only absurd (Catholics can leave and join any number of religions that have succumbed to the culture), it suggests a reluctance to credit them with good judgment for approving the pope’s performance.”