

KANSAS CITY STAR SEX SURVEY IMPLODES

The lead story in the December *Catalyst* was on the sex survey of Catholic priests taken by the *Kansas City Star*. As soon as the survey was mailed in October, the Catholic League responded with a survey of its own: we sent the staff at the newspaper a similarly-worded survey questioning their sex lives. We also blasted the newspaper-turned-tabloid for sponsoring “Peeping Tom” journalism.

Beginning January 30, the *Kansas City Star* published its lengthy three-part series on AIDS and priests. It immediately became the source of great controversy, though some of the most prestigious newspapers (e.g. the *New York Times*) totally ignored the story. Anti-Catholic radio talk show hosts, cartoonists and others had a field day accusing the Church of all sorts of crimes. But it wasn’t long before the newspaper itself was put on the defensive for its irresponsible survey and attendant story.

David Murray and S. Robert Lichter are two experts in the field of survey research. Murray is research director at the Statistical Assessment Service and Lichter is president of the Center for Media and Public Affairs. When they learned of the *Kansas City Stars* survey, they submitted it to examination. What they found was troubling, to say the least.

A total of 801 priests answered the survey and 2,212 did not, yielding a response rate of 27 percent. Murray and Lichter said that “few survey researchers would consider a 27 percent response rate to be ‘very good,’” adding that in such instances “follow-up surveys” are typically conducted; this was not the case.

They also concluded that the survey’s margin of error of 3.5

percent was a “boilerplate description of sampling error.” They made this charge because it is not known whether “the minority who responded were unusually concerned about AIDS, differentially open to questions of personal sexuality, or even more likely to have a homosexual orientation than the 2,212 non-respondents.”

Of all the conclusions that the *Kansas City Star* came to, nothing was more sensationalistic than its finding that the death rate among priests with AIDS was 4 times the general population rate. But as Murray and Lichter showed, this is pure nonsense: by comparing priests to the general population, they were including women and children, and therefore offered a skewed comparison. When the rate of AIDS-related deaths among priests is contrasted with the rate among adult males, the difference disappears—they have the same rate!

And it wasn't just Murray and Lichter who showed how bogus the survey was. Tom W. Smith, director of the General Social Survey at the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, charged that when information is not collected in the same way, “you can't do a legitimate comparison. This is a classic apples-and-oranges thing,” he said.

Also critical was Michael Traugott, professor and research scientist at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan and president of the American Association for Public Opinion Research. He criticized the wording of the newspaper's cover letter, for the fact that there was no geographical or demographic balance sought among respondents.

When confronted with criticism of the survey's methodology, Mark Ziemann, editor and vice president of the newspaper, changed the subject. That was not the main point of the story, he said. He fell back on the need to listen to those priests who were quoted in the article. But this is disingenuous:

those priests are not representative of most priests and to ignore the methodological flaws in the survey is to make conclusions based on falsehoods. If none of this matters, we are dealing with fiction, not fact, and therefore the entire report is a hoax.

Even if we take the survey at face value, there are real problems. For example, the Catholic League pointed out to the media that the conclusions drawn were not supported by the data. To wit: the survey data showed that exactly one-half of one percent of priests have HIV or AIDS, and exactly 3.6 percent of priests are critical of the way the Church has responded to this problem.

What is striking about this is that the narrative offered in the series was written from the perspective that AIDS is rampant in the priesthood and that the clergy are furious with the way the Church has handled this problem. In essence, what could not be accomplished by citing the data had to be done by substituting anecdotal commentary drawn from a handful of angry priests *and* former priests.

It was also striking that 70 percent of the priests said that changing the Church's teachings on homosexuality would not prove effective in dealing with this problem and two-thirds said that changing the celibacy requirement would not prove effective. Yet the narrative holds that "the Catholic Church's condemnation of homosexual acts, its requirement that priests be male and its unique demand of celibacy make the issue all the more vexing for its followers."

However, this conclusion was not supported by the data. Once again, the agenda was evident: by citing unnamed "experts" who urge the Church to change its teachings, the editors invented support for their position that their own data did not allow. And notice, too, that they even threw in a shot about the male clergy, as if that contributes to AIDS.

Just as amazing was the citation of the work of Richard Sipe. He previously reported that 2 percent of priests were pedophiles, yet an examination of his data showed that he was speaking simply of those who have such *tendencies*, and not actual behavior.

The paper correctly said that the Catholic Church has no policy on AIDS. So what? A phone call to the newspaper revealed that neither do they; nor does either have a policy on diabetes. As we said to the media, we await the results of their own in-house sex survey so we can make a “scientific” comparison and then send the results to Howard Stern for analysis.

The Catholic League also told the media that the survey smacked of an agenda from the very beginning. Indeed, we challenged the *Star* to broaden their survey the next time. The Torah, we said, forbids an Orthodox Jewish man from having sex with his wife while she is menstruating and for a time afterward. During Ramadan, which lasts for a month, Muslims are forbidden from having sex during the daylight hours of their fasting period.

Question for the *Star*: will they now do a survey of Jews and Muslims to see how many are cheating? And while they’re at it, they may want to explore why a reported 37 percent of Protestant pastors have confessed to having been involved in inappropriate sexual behavior with someone in the church.

The Catholic League sent a copy of its criticisms of the survey along with the analysis by Murray and Lichter to every bishop in the nation. Some bishops called the league asking for help and we were glad to provide it. We also wrote to P. Anthony Ridder, chairman and CEO of Knight Ridder, Inc. (the *Star* is a Knight Ridder newspaper) registering our complaints.

We are urging all Catholic League members to let their

feelings known to Mark Zieman, editor and vice president, *Kansas City Star*, 1729 Grand Blvd., Kansas City, MO 64108. You can call him at 816-234-4141 or fax him at 816-234-4923. His e-mail address is zieman@kcstar.com.

How would you describe the church's response in ministering to priests with HIV and AIDS?

Caring and compassionate 65.4%

Other 19.0%

Only took care of the priests basic needs 12.0%

Judgmental and uncaring 1.8%

Ignored priests 1.8%

How would you identify yourself sexually?

Heterosexual 77.6%

Homosexual 14.9%

Bisexual 5.2%

Other 2.3%

Using a scale from 1 to 5, where 5 = Extremely effective and 1 = Not at all effective, please rate the ways you think the church can deal with priests needs and concerns regarding HIV and AIDS in the clergy.

Provide more education in the seminaries on sexual issues

1 2.4%

2 3.8%

3 18.1%

4 23.6%

5 52.1%

Encourage open dialogue/communication

1 2.4%

2 4.0%

3 16.4%

4 22.1%

5 55.1%

Change church doctrine on homosexuality

1 60.3%

2 9.3%

3 10.8%

4 5.6%

5 13.9%

Eliminate celibacy requirements

1 54.8%

2 10.6%

3 15.1%

4 4.2%

5 15.3%