

# “Opinion-Poll Catholics” and Their Church

*[box type="shadow"]This piece by Don Feder appeared in the New York Post on August 16, 1993. We thank Mr. Feder for giving us permission to reprint this piece. Mr. Feder is the author of **A Jewish Conservative Looks at Pagan America**, published by Huntington House. Anyone interested in obtaining a copy of this excellent and very readable collection of his columns can call the publisher at 1-800-749- 4009 for information.[/box]*

The news media will never be guilty of originality. In preparation for the pope’s third visit to the United States, which ended yesterday, it resorted to a timeworn tactic – opinion polls of American Catholics, so-called .

Two days before he arrived in Denver, a front-page story in *USA Today*, America’s comic-book newspaper, trumpeted the divergence between John Paul II and his flock.

According to this survey of Catholics ages 30 to 49, one can use birth control (89 percent), have sex outside marriage (57 percent), divorce with- out an annulment (71 percent), have an abortion (57 percent) and not go to confession annually (71 percent) and still be a “good Catholic.”

We’re so subtle. The pleading fairly leaps off the page: “See, see, even his own people disagree with him on every controversial issue. How many loyal divisions does the pope have? His views are quaint ecclesiastical anachronisms, representative of nearly no one.”

As an accompaniment, we heard from the habitual harping chorus of “disaffected Catholics” the media invariably deploys to pre-empt papal sojourns – feminist Catholics, homosexual Catholics, those who think the priesthood should be a 9-to-5 job (off with the vestments, back home to the wife and

kiddies), trendy theologians and proponents of cafeteria Catholicism.

What qualifies opinion-poll Catholics to have an opinion on a faith from which they are alienated and of which the majority are clearly ignorant?

Now, if *USA Today* had run a survey of adults who had a Catholic education, were steeped in the works of Thomas Aquinas, Cardinal Newman and Fulton Sheen, attend Mass weekly, go to confession, take Communion and are active in Catholic life, their perspective might be significant.

However, for the media's purposes, it is enough to be born into a Catholic family to be counted in these studies. That's far too much deference for a tenuous connection. Opinion-poll Catholics will be found in church only for weddings and baptisms. (The average evangelical has a better understanding of Catholic teaching.) Their affinity for the ancient faith is essentially nostalgic.

One of the conscientious Catholics quoted in the *USA Today* piece is Fred Ruof of Baltimore, who – while proclaiming his opposition to the Vatican – insists: "It's a church I love." But what precisely does he love – the music, the candles, the stained-glass windows, bingo?

These are to Catholicism what bagels and cream cheese are to Judaism. To love the Catholic church on this basis is like saying one loves America because July is his favorite month and red, white and blue his preferred colors.

Say you met a man who said he "loved" America but it was the Constitution, representative government, our history and heritage he couldn't stand. (Besides which, the American Revolution was a tragic mistake.)

Having rejected the essence of Americanism, his profession of devotion would be a travesty.

When we say that someone is a good whatever – Jew, Baptist, Rotarian, Republican – we usually mean the individual is loyal to a creed, understands and accepts the tenets thereof, is willing to sacrifice for that with which he identifies, is committed to making his actions conform to certain norms.

But language has become so twisted that words have lost any semblance of meaning. Thus academic liberals can consider themselves champions of free expression while seeking to suppress opposing views. Democrats are paladins of the people while raising taxes. Gay right proponents label immoral those who refuse to condone immorality.

Hence the notion of good, anti-papal Catholics. At what are they good? Ignoring the dictates of their faith? Uncritically absorbing the values of their culture?

In the final analysis, even assuming opinion-survey Catholics were knowledgeable and committed, would it really matter? To be a Catholic is, by definition, to submit to authority. Doctrine isn't determined by the temper of the times but is validated by a more venerable source.

The idea of democracy, while fine in its realm, isn't universally applicable. Religions are based on revelations, not plebiscites.

No one elected God. Once dogma is subject to popular opinions, what will be sacred? Perhaps all of the Gallup Catholics should get together and vote on the concept of the Trinity – (“let's see a show of hands”) or the Christian doctrine of atonement and redemption.

There's nothing more sobering than listening to the theologically unwashed lecturing a 2,000 year-old church.