

PEW SURVEY IS UNIQUE BUT NOT A GAME-CHANGER

On September 2, the Pew Research Center released a survey on Catholics.

In terms of methodological precision, the Pew Research Center has no rival. Its latest survey is no exception: it offered an in-depth picture of Catholics. But its decision to examine those who are no longer Catholic, or never were, is of questionable utility.

The title and subtitle of the report reflected its discontinuity. The title read, "U.S. Catholics Open to Non-Traditional Families." The subtitle, "45% of Americans Are Catholic or Connected to Catholicism" bore no relationship to the title. Moreover, it was not clear why this figure even mattered. "Connected to Catholics"?

Most surveys contrast practicing and non-practicing Catholics, as judged by Mass attendance. This survey did this as well, but it also included "Cultural Catholics," namely, those who are no longer Catholic but continue to think of themselves as such (converts and non-believers). Probing self-identity is an interesting subject, but to what end? If a vegetarian turns carnivorous, yet persists in considering himself a vegetarian, would we include him in a survey of vegetarians? Pew's typology also included self-identified "Ex-Catholics." Would ex-Muslims be included in a survey of Muslims? And as noted, the survey included "Connected to Catholics." We never learned why they are worth studying.

Not surprisingly, "Cultural Catholics" and "Ex-Catholics" are less likely to accept the Church's teachings. But it is nice to know they like the pope.

One finding which never varies is the correlation between Mass

attendance and fidelity to Church teachings: practicing Catholics are the most likely to accept the teachings of the Church; women, seniors, and those who are married are the most practicing. In this regard, "Most Catholics are very loyal to the church," is one of its most salient findings.

There was much to mine in this report. Unfortunately, there was much that was of dubious significance.