

POPE'S PERFORMANCE RATINGS SLIP

Catholic League president Bill Donohue comments on a new survey on Pope Francis:

Next week, Pope Francis will celebrate his fifth anniversary as pontiff. Fortunately, Pew Research Center has just published a survey of his tenure, giving us a good idea of how he is doing.

Most news reports are focusing on his high favorability rating—84 percent among Catholics—noting that Republican Catholics are slightly less inclined (79 percent) to see him that way. That analysis masks some deeper problems for the pope.

Regarding the pope's favorability rating, he compares well against his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, but fares poorly against Pope John Paul II. Unfortunately for Benedict, John Paul II was a hard act to follow—his favorability rating hit over 90 percent in the mid-1990s. Moreover, unlike Francis, the media never warmed to Benedict, and in some quarters were openly hostile.

Favorability ratings are not unimportant, but they lack specificity: they tell us nothing about a leader's performance on important issues. This is where Pope Francis' numbers have been slipping.

Have the changes made by Pope Francis been for the better or the worse? Five years into his papacy, the percent who say he is a major change for the better has fallen from 69 percent to 58 percent. The percent that say he is not a major change for the better grew from 17 percent to 26 percent (7 percent say he is a major change for the worse, up from 3 percent).

These changes are statistically significant; they are also troubling. What accounts for the falloff?

The percent of Catholics who think he is “too liberal” has grown in five years from 19 percent to 34 percent; during that same time, the percent who dub him “naive” has spiked from 15 percent to 24 percent.

In 2013, 84 percent of Catholics said the pope was doing an “excellent or good job,” but today that figure is 70 percent. Five years ago 10 percent said his performance was “only fair or poor,” but today it has climbed to 25 percent.

How is he doing with “standing up for traditional morals”? Not well—his numbers are going south. In 2013, 80 percent rated him “excellent or good,” but in 2018 the figure dropped to 70 percent. Those who say he is doing “only fair or poor” rose from 13 percent to 26 percent.

What about addressing the sex abuse scandal? When he began his tenure, 55 percent rated his work as “excellent or good,” but now only 45 percent feel this way. Conversely, five years ago 34 percent said he was doing “only fair or poor,” but now that figure is 46 percent. Even worse, the Pew survey was taken before the pope’s disastrous trip to Chile (the sex abuse scandal blew up during his visit).

It won’t be easy for the pope to change these numbers. If a third of Catholics see him as “too liberal,” and a quarter label him “naive,” the prospects for him to pivot are not auspicious.