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An East Asian man wearing white vestments shakes hands with another man, while another r

Fr. Chin Nguyen greets a well-wisher following his ordination to the priesthood June 5, 2021, at the Co-Cathedral of St. Joseph in Brooklyn, N.Y. Nguyen, who was born in Vietnam, was one of four men ordained by Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio of Brooklyn at the Mass. (OSV News photo/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Gina Christian

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A closer look at the largest survey of U.S. Catholic priests in 50 years has revealed "a major shift in how priests view themselves and their priesthood," said researchers.

Compared to their older peers, younger priests are far more likely to describe themselves as theologically orthodox or conservative, politically conservative or moderate, and prepared to be "first responders" to the abuse victims they encounter in their ministry. Furthermore, researchers noted "a significant proportion of American priests say that they had 'personally experienced sexual harassment or abuse or suffered sexual misconduct' during their formation or time in seminary."

The findings were detailed in "Polarization, Generational Dynamics, and the Ongoing Impact of the Abuse Crisis: Further Insights from the National Study of Catholic Priests," a November 2023 report released by The Catholic Project, an initiative from The Catholic University of America designed to foster effective collaboration between the church's clergy and laity in the wake of the sexual abuse crisis.

The report drew on data collected for The Catholic Project's landmark "National Study of Catholic Priests," the results of which were issued in October 2022 and featured responses from 3,516 priests (out of 10,000) across 191 dioceses and eparchies. The national study also included in-depth interviews with more than 100 priests selected from those respondents and a census survey of U.S. bishops that drew 131 responses.

Three themes were the focus of the November 2023 report on that data: polarization, generational dynamics and the ongoing impact of the abuse crisis in the Catholic Church.

Stephen White, executive director of The Catholic Project, told OSV News the research represents an effort "to really understand how our priests are doing ... so that we can provide the data that can help bishops and priests."

He said, "This is really a tool for the edification and help of the church."

With respect to theology and doctrine, younger priests are far more likely to describe themselves as "conservative/orthodox" or "very conservative/orthodox," as opposed to "very progressive," "somewhat progressive" or "middle of the road," according to the report.

"More than half of the priests who were ordained since 2010 see themselves on the conservative side of the scale," said the report. "No surveyed priests who were ordained after 2020 described themselves as 'very progressive.' "

That shift became particularly apparent among the cohort of respondents ordained between 1985-1989, and has continued to the present, according to the report.

One survey respondent quoted anonymously in the report said "priests in their 70s and 60s now would be one cohort," with a Pope John Paul II generation that "would be very orthodox" with some "freeflowing" liturgical approaches. The respondent broadly characterized priests ordained during Pope Benedict XVI's papacy as "the

hard-on-everything kind of guys," while "the young guys now … have a lot in common with those last few cohorts."

The report noted that while theologically "progressive" and "very progressive" priests once made up 68% of new ordinands -- the 1965-1969 cohort -- it added that number today "has dwindled almost to zero."

White also told OSV News that as "the priesthood has become more unified over time theologically, it's become more moderate politically, and it's become more racially diverse, racially and ethnically diverse over time."

In fact, the report noted that in contrast to the theological trend among priests, the trend in their political views "seems to have stabilized to include a large proportion of 'moderates.' "

"While roughly half (52%) of the recently-ordained cohort described themselves as 'conservative' or 'very conservative,' a full 44% (the highest percentage of any cohort) self-described as 'moderate,' " said the report.

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Yet "it's important to qualify" such descriptors, said White.

"These are ways that priests themselves chose to describe themselves. And across generations, that changes," he said, stressing that "context matters."

"At the Second Vatican Council, Joseph Ratzinger (the future Pope Benedict XVI) would have fairly been described as sort of a reformer or more progressive relative to his surroundings," White said. "And without having changed too much 30 years later, he would have been described very differently."

Additionally, "despite younger age and ordination cohorts trending more conservative/orthodox both politically and theologically, the overwhelming majority of these youngest priests do value accountability to Pope Francis," who is often regarded as being more liberal than his predecessors, said the report.

The researchers found as well that priests tended to trust bishops whom they perceived to share their theological and political views. Overall, levels of trust expressed by priests in their bishop varied widely among dioceses, from 100% to as

low as 9%.

Noting that "the causes and consequences of these shifts" are "no doubt complex," the report said qualitative interviews with respondents pointed to "two watershed moments" that shape priests' perception of themselves: the Second Vatican Council and the clergy sexual abuse crisis of 2002.

Regarding the abuse crisis, the report anonymously quoted several respondents ordained after 2002 who indicated they accepted that healing the wounds is essential to their pastoral ministry.

"The Lord intends to use me and my priesthood to help restore this and restore the trust and credibility of the priesthood for people," said one respondent, while another quoted his seminary rector as saying, "You guys will spend your entire priesthood restoring trust."

The data showed that "71% of priests report knowing at least one victim-survivor of clergy sexual abuse, with 11% knowing five or more."

However, priests are also among the victims of sexual abuse with 9% reporting they personally experienced sexual harassment or abuse or suffered sexual misconduct during priestly formation or seminary; another 6% said they were unsure or preferred not to answer.

The majority of priests surveyed (69%) "say that they feel well-prepared to minister to a victim of abuse, and 54% report that they are already doing so," the report said.

"There's a sense in which the church in the United States is about two decades ahead of much of the rest of the church in responding to the abuse crisis," White said.

He and his team found in their report that "against the backdrop of all these challenges, priests remain largely satisfied in their ministry and few (4%) are considering leaving.

"Many of these trends have been decades in the making and show little sign of reversal any time soon. Building trust and restoring confidence begins with mutual understanding," the report stated. "It is our hope that the data presented here can strengthen that understanding among all Catholics, but particularly for our bishops and priests upon whom so much depends."