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French Catholics: An untold story?

by Dennis Coday

NCR Today

The Tablet (the one from London, not Brooklyn) carries this story in its latest issue:

French turn their backs on the Church

The number of weekly Massgoers in France has dropped steeply from 20 per cent in 1972 to 4.5 per cent today. This was the most striking finding of a survey carried out by the IFOP polling organization between 2005 and 2009 for the daily *Le Monde* earlier this month.

The survey also indicated that the typical French Catholic is female, over 50, and politically right-wing.

The figures confirm the steady decline of Catholicism in France - even though it remains the dominant religion (64 per cent of the population describe themselves as Catholic, as opposed to 87 per cent in 1972).

It seems to be a story already reported many times. But I had to wonder if the real story got buried. Here's the last paragraph of *The Tablet* story:

Fr Edmond Vandermeersch, a Jesuit sociologist who is engaged in the pastoral care of the young and a chaplain of the Jesuit-inspired lay movement *Vie Chrétienne*, was far from pessimistic about the survey: "The hierarchy is obsessed with statistics about Mass attendance and they do not see that a new Church is being invented before their eyes. They do not see the riches in the new forms of spirituality experimented with by the young, in the growing numbers studying theology and the Scriptures, in the devoted service of the Church by the laity, especially women. Instead of wringing

their hands over falling Mass attendance the bishops should be thankful that so many laymen and women are prepared to assume responsibility in the Church."

That's the story I would like to read more about.

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