

## Catholic millennials: We're a complex bunch

Kate Childs Graham | Feb. 25, 2010

This month, the Knights of Columbus released [the results of a survey](#) [1] done with Marist Poll on the attitudes of young Catholics in the U.S., ages 18 to 29. From the press release and executive summary, one would think that most, if not all, US Catholic Millennials toe the Knights' party line.

The Knights' news release states: "Some of the good news for the Catholic church in the survey includes: 85 percent of Catholic Millennials (those 18-29) believe in God and top priorities for many are having a family and being close to God." The news release also says this of Catholic Millennials: 82 percent believe commitment to marriage is under-valued, 80 percent see religion as at least "somewhat important" in their lives and 66 percent say abortion is morally wrong, while 63% say the same of euthanasia.

The Knights led with their best stuff. And who can blame them? After spending a lot of money on a poll, I certainly understand why they'd frame the results to back their politics.

Buried underneath the Knights' top line statements, the poll reveals a much more complex picture of Catholic Millennials, showing that oftentimes young Catholics are more progressive than young people as a whole. Again, I don't blame the Knights for burying this information, and I'm more than happy to parse some of it out here for them.

When asked whether morals are relative or "fixed and based on unchanging standards," a resounding 82 percent of Catholic Millennials chose relativism -- this is compared with 64 percent of Millennials as a whole. That's an 18-point spread. My question: what is it about the Catholicism -- argued (by some) to be an absolutist faith tradition -- that makes us relativists? I have a hunch that has to do with church teaching on conscience.

Now, the Knights surveyed "practicing" Catholics of all generations, as well as general US Catholics. And, though they don't explain how they identified "practicing" Catholics, I have to say that this distinction is bothersome for a number of reasons I won't go into here. Nonetheless, on relativism, US Catholics came in at 63 percent and "practicing" Catholics came in at 46 percent.

When asked about a number of moral choices, the results may be astounding -- especially if you read/believe the comments on this blog that continually assert that we young Catholics who support issues like same-sex marriage are in the minority. (Not that I don't appreciate dialogue, debate and challenging questions in the comments section ... seriously, I do.)

On same-sex marriage, 63 percent of Catholic Millennials think it is morally acceptable or not a moral issue, compared with 53 percent of Millennials.

On gay and lesbian relations, 65 percent of Catholic Millennials think it is morally acceptable or not a moral issue, compared with 57 percent of Millennials.

On having a baby outside of marriage, 64 percent of Catholic Millennials think it is morally acceptable or not a

moral issue, compared with 60 percent of Millennials.

On divorce, 65 percent of Catholic Millennials and Millennials think it is morally acceptable or not a moral issue.

On embryonic stem cell research, 67 percent of Catholic Millennials and Millennials think it is morally acceptable or not a moral issue.

On premarital sex, 80 percent of Catholic Millennials think it is morally acceptable or not a moral issue, compared with 67 percent of Millennials.

It's perplexing that they didn't ask about contraception, but I think the having a baby outside of marriage and premarital sex questions probably give us a glimpse of what the results would be.

So, you can see why the Knights -- who have donated millions of dollars to defeating same-sex marriage legislation across the country -- wouldn't want to highlight these statistics that show not only that a vast majority of Catholic Millennials are alright with same-sex marriage, gay and lesbian relations, having a baby outside of marriage, divorce, stem cell research and premarital sex, but also that Catholic Millennials support these issues at a higher rate than Millennials as a whole. I'm actually a little surprised -- and very grateful -- that they published these results at all.

Juxtaposed with the statistic that shows only 37 percent of Catholic Millennials consider themselves "liberal," it seems that, on these issues, support goes beyond the liberal-conservative divide. (The poll results didn't show the percentage of Catholic Millennials who identified as conservative or moderate.)

Perhaps I'm reading too much into it, but the idea that we can rise above partisan politics and ideologies, look at the moral complexities of hot button issues and stand in opposition to our "party" line if our conscience compels us is pretty spectacular. It gives me a great deal of hope for the future of our country and our church.

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