

## Survey reveals generation shift in the Catholic church

William D'Antonio | Oct. 24, 2011  
Catholics in America



Students from the University of Wisconsin at Green Bay sit on the grass during an evening outdoor Mass at the Richard Mauthe Center on the university's campus Sept. 11. (CNS/The Compass/Sam Lucero)

### *Generations*

A growing body of literature in sociology has shown that experiences during individuals' formative years, especially traumatic events such as wars, the Great Depression, tsunamis and other disasters, produce cultural and structural patterns within the particular period that set apart those who have lived through them from other generations. We applied this idea to Roman Catholics in the United States, because there are important historical events that demarcate distinct Catholic generations, with the Second Vatican Council as the major divide in the recent history of the church. It made sense to distinguish among three distinctive generations of Catholics: pre-Vatican II, Vatican II and post-Vatican II Catholics. The differences we found from our surveys of 1987 and 1993 led us to expect that the generations would continue to have different beliefs, practices and attitudes toward the church throughout their lives, even when they were at the same age or stage in life as the generations immediately before and after them. Our five surveys over 25 years enable us to test that expectation. {C}

Pre-Vatican II Catholics, that is, Catholics born in 1940 or earlier, came of age in a church where Mass was said in Latin, the priest with his back to the people. The axiom was that you either went to Mass on Sunday or you were surely going to hell. Most Catholics chose Mass, and weekly Mass attendance rates reached as high as 75 percent in 1958. These Catholics were also the children and grandchildren of immigrants from Ireland, Italy, Poland, Germany and other European countries, essentially the white ethnic wave that came to the United States between 1840 and 1925. Thus, at the time of our first survey in 1987, they constituted about one in three of all Catholic adults (31 percent); they ranged in age from 47 to 90-plus.

Vatican II Catholics were born between 1941 and 1960; in 1987 they constituted nearly half (47 percent) of all Catholics. Vatican II Catholics had one foot in the old Latin Mass church and the other foot in the new English-language Mass church, with the priest now facing the people. These were the Catholics most clearly influenced by the changes brought on by the documents and the spirit of Vatican II. Events showed them to be the most

active in moving away from being just "pray, pay and obey" Catholics. They became "the people of God," with emphasis on the community of believers rather than the pre-Vatican II emphasis on priests and religious as somehow closer to God by virtue of their status in the church. They overlapped with the so-called baby boom generation, and witnessed the election and assassination of President John Kennedy; the Vietnam War and its divisive aftermath; and Watergate. The documents and spirit of Vatican II left the oldest among them unprepared for the reaffirmation of the church's official condemnation of artificial contraception in Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*.

Post-Vatican II Catholics were only 22 percent of the adult Catholic population in 1987. They became known popularly as the Gen-X Americans. They would continue to grow in numbers through the next two surveys, their generation finally spanning the period 1961-78. For them the Mass in English was all they knew, and the documents of Vatican II were seen and interpreted through the charisma of Pope John Paul II. Polls showed that they were fond of John Paul and turned out in record numbers for his youth rallies, while becoming increasingly influenced in personal beliefs, attitudes and behavior by the ethos of individualism and self-actualization that gained in cultural dominance in the 1970s, culminating with the disillusionment over the Vietnam War, Watergate, the student and women's movements, and even the civil rights movement.

Even as they cheered John Paul II, they tended to ignore his pleas for sexual abstinence, natural family planning, or going to Mass and confession on a regular basis, as evidenced by their responses to our surveys.

Our 2005 survey brought evidence of the arrival of a new generation, the millennials, the first generation to come of age in the 21st century. Born between 1979 and 1987, they were only 9 percent of the Catholic population in 2005 (by 2011 they now include those born 1987-93, making up 23 percent of the Catholic population). They seemed to identify with John Paul's concerns for the poor, the environment and the common good. At the same time, they continued to decide for themselves the morality of homosexuality, and sexual behavior in general. Moreover, they were the first generation of the digitalized world of iPods, BlackBerries, texting and globalization. Their world was also turned upside down by 9/11 (as were all the generations?), the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and then the recession that took hold in 2008. As Catholics, their world was shaken by the sex abuse scandal that gained prominence in 2002 and continues to impact the institutional church. They've also lived through the death of John Paul, and the ascendance of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger to the papacy as Benedict XVI.

[Figure 1](#) shows the changes in the size of the generations during the past 25 years. The inevitability of mortality has reduced the pre-Vatican II generation from one in three Catholics in 1987 to but one in 10 of all adult Catholics in 2011, a fact that greatly affects who will be sitting in the pews on any given weekend in the next few years.

Vatican II Catholics, almost half (47 percent) of all Catholics in 1987, are now one in three (33 percent), with the post-Vatican II generation also claiming one-third of adult Catholics at 34 percent.

Millennial Catholics have grown considerably since 2005, and now constitute 23 percent of adult Catholics. A significant and growing portion of the millennials are Hispanic (45 percent), and their proportion of the millennials will increase until such time as a new generation of Catholics will enter the scene. Our comparison of Hispanic and non-Hispanic Catholics in this publication may help establish benchmarks for the future.

Now that we have described the changes in size of the four generations, it is time to find out how well they have met our expectations of stability within their generation and differences across generations. [Table 2](#) and [Table 3](#) help us appreciate both the stability and the change that have characterized Catholic life in the past quarter century.

## Going to Mass

Mass attendance patterns have been more or less stable within and different across generations. Pre-Vatican II Catholics have been the most regular Mass attenders, reflecting their strong ties to patterns preceding Vatican II. Nevertheless, their rate of attendance in 2011 is 10 percentage points below their high point of 64 percent in 1999. Their answers to questions about why they do or do not attend Mass may help explain this drop in attendance.



Regular Mass attendance rates of Vatican II Catholics have been as high as

42 percent, but consistently about 20 percent lower than their elders. Perhaps here also their reasons for attending or not attending Mass will help explain their current pattern, with significant declines in the two most recent surveys.

The average attendance rates of post-Vatican II Catholics have been very stable, around or just under 30 percent. The fact that they have not exceeded 30 percent raises questions about the conventional wisdom that when people marry and have children, they return to church. This may be happening, but on such a small scale that it does not show in the surveys. Nor is there evidence of this occurring among Vatican II Catholics.

The exception to this pattern occurred among the millennials, who reported an 8 percent increase in Mass attendance between 2005 and 2011. It appears that much of the increase may be attributed to the fact that 26 percent of Hispanic millennials said they go to Mass every week, compared to 20 percent of non-Hispanic millennials. In our 2005 survey we did not have a large enough sample of Hispanic millennials to provide an accurate picture of their actual Mass attendance rate. That problem has been resolved. Another indicator of differences between the two millennial groups regarding Mass attendance is that more than one in four non-Hispanic Catholics said they seldom or never go to Mass, while only one in 10 Hispanics gave that response. We will also explore their reasons for going or not going to Mass more frequently.

The white, ethnic European Catholics who dominated the life and culture of the American church in the 19th and 20th centuries are giving way to a more culturally diverse body of Catholics, primarily from Latin America, but also from Asia and Africa. These changes will be especially apparent by generations, as the demographics of differential fertility, immigration and mortality make clear. The essay on Hispanic and non-Hispanic millennials ([see story](#) [1]) will also explore more deeply the areas of change that are now happening or are on the horizon.

[Table 2](#) shows the responses to two questions included for the first time in the 2011 survey.

We hoped the answers would cast more light on why Catholics do or do not attend Mass. One dealt with important reasons why Catholics say they go to Mass, and the other important reasons why they do not go more frequently than they do. By far the two most important reasons given for going to Mass are "experiencing the liturgy" and "feeling the need for Eucharist," checked by large majorities of all four generations. The third most frequently cited reason, "enjoyment of the company of others at Mass," was also supported by a majority of Catholics from all four generations. A minority of all four groups (from 42 percent of pre-Vatican II Catholics

to 34 percent of the millennials) gave as an important reason that "the church requires it." No other reasons received close to the level of support given to the four reasons above.

The most frequently cited important reason for not going to Mass more often was "I'm just not a religious person," with four in 10 Catholics showing consensus across the four generations. Family responsibilities were cited by half of the two younger generations as an important reason for not going to Mass more often, and by 30 percent of the two older generations. Health reasons were third in importance, with between one in four and one in three citing this, except for Vatican II Catholics, who were least likely to cite this as an important reason. Ranked number four as an important reason for not going to Mass more often was "It is not a mortal sin." Between one in three and one in five among the generations gave this response. No other reason received as much support as those above.

In the 1993 survey, seven out of 10 pre-Vatican II Catholics said they "cannot imagine being anything but Catholic," also affirmed by small majorities of the other two generations. In 2011, despite the turmoil caused by the sex abuse scandals and declining Mass attendance, between two-thirds and three-fourths of Catholics across the generations continued to strongly or somewhat agree that they could not imagine being anything but Catholic. A variant on that question, "Being Catholic is a very important part of who I am," also reveals continued strong support over time across generations. A final measure of their commitment to the church in [Table 2](#), "The church is among the most important influences on my life," finds a range of support, from about half of pre-Vatican II Catholics to one in three of the millennials.

There is a high degree of persistence within generations and strong majority support over time for four core elements of the faith, and a fifth that is held by the Vatican but is not seen in that way by the laity. The sacraments, Jesus' life, death and resurrection, helping the poor, and the church's teachings about Mary as the mother of God all continue to receive strong majority support from all generations, even while the level of support has decreased. A clear majority of all Catholics across the generations also believe in the real presence of Christ in the eucharistic celebration.

The level of support for the "teaching authority claimed by the Vatican" has declined across generations, so that there are now no differences between them, with only three in 10 saying the Vatican's claim to teaching authority was very important to them as Catholics. Nonetheless, as shown by the majority who accept the real presence teaching, the laity make a distinction between the teachings that they uphold, which are ultimately matters of faith, and those teachings that relate to social, political and sexual issues in contemporary society, about which Catholics seem increasingly to want to use their reason and life experiences to help them decide what they believe.

## **Social teachings**

[Table 3](#) changes the focus to the current survey, and to the church's teachings on sociopolitical matters, many of which are referred to as the church's social teachings, or teachings on social justice.

The first three items refer to issues addressed recently by the bishops. A bare majority of the pre-Vatican II and Vatican II Catholics oppose the bishops' opposition to the health care reform bill passed in March 2010, while a majority of the two younger generations support the bishops. A strong majority of Catholics in all four generations support the bishops' call for immigration reform. Two of three pre-Vatican II Catholics support the bishops in their opposition to same-sex marriage while the other three generations are evenly split. A majority of Catholics across generations support the role of women as priests in the Catholic church, a position that the Vatican has declared to be not subject to consideration.

In 1999 for the first time we asked a series of questions based on the peace and economy pastorals issued by the bishops in 1983 and 1986, respectively. In the three surveys in which we have asked questions related to these

pastorals, Catholics across generations continue to support strongly "more government funds for health care for poor children." In the 1999 survey a majority across generations opposed more government funds for the military; in 2005, with the U.S. at war in Iraq and Afghanistan, there was more support for the military, and now in 2011 majorities in all four generations support more funds for the military. A strong majority have consistently supported stiffer enforcement of the death penalty, while a great majority of Catholics across the generations continue to oppose more funds for nuclear weapons. Catholics have moved from a majority opposed to further cuts in welfare programs, to a majority in all four generations now supporting further cutbacks.

In 2005 we asked Catholics to provide their political party affiliation. In 2005 Catholic Democrats outnumbered Catholic Republicans in three of the four generations, with Republicans dominant in the post-Vatican II group. Independents were a small minority in each generation. The volatility of the last two and a half years is reflected in the affiliations claimed in 2011. The most notable change is in the high percentage of independents in each of the four generations. Democrats register higher percentages than Republicans in all generations. However, among millennials, the difference now is only 12 percentage points, as opposed to almost 30 points in 2005.

In 2011, respondents were asked to indicate their leaning if they had selected "independent" as their preference. Those who stated they were leaning Republican or Democrat were put in their respective party categories, leaving the absolutely "independent" at 3 percent of the total. This redistribution of the independents led to the affiliations listed in the final columns. Democrats have large majorities in all four generations. Given the volatility of the present political scene, and the wide range of support and opposition to key issues as suggested by the items in Table 3, these findings suggest that the issues that may be central to the 2012 campaign, some of which have been discussed here, may well influence the movement of the independents in either direction.

## Summary

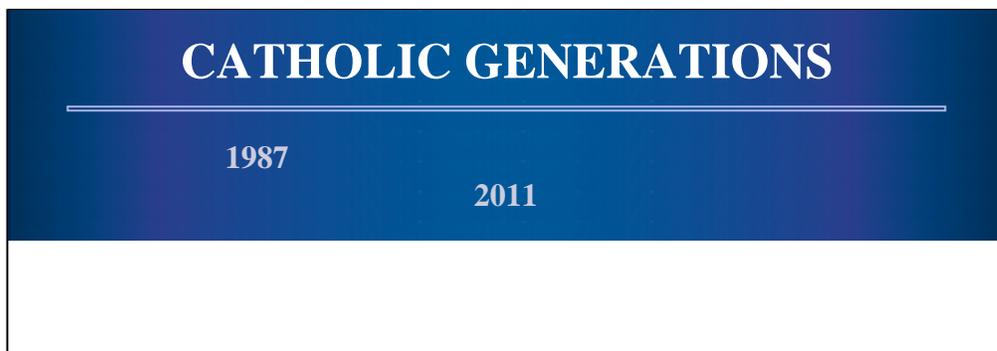
[Figure 1](#) and [Table 2](#) and [Table 3](#) reveal distinctive areas of persistence and change within and across generations during the course of five surveys and a quarter of a century. The mortality of the generation that so dominated the American Catholic church in the 20th century is inexorable. The growth of the millennial generation brings with it a new kind of ethnic mix, with new patterns of Mass attendance and a continuing decline in the ability of church leaders to dictate policy based only on their claims to authority, but also clearly a continuing acceptance of the core teachings that derive from the early church and Jesus' teachings about concern for "the least of these."

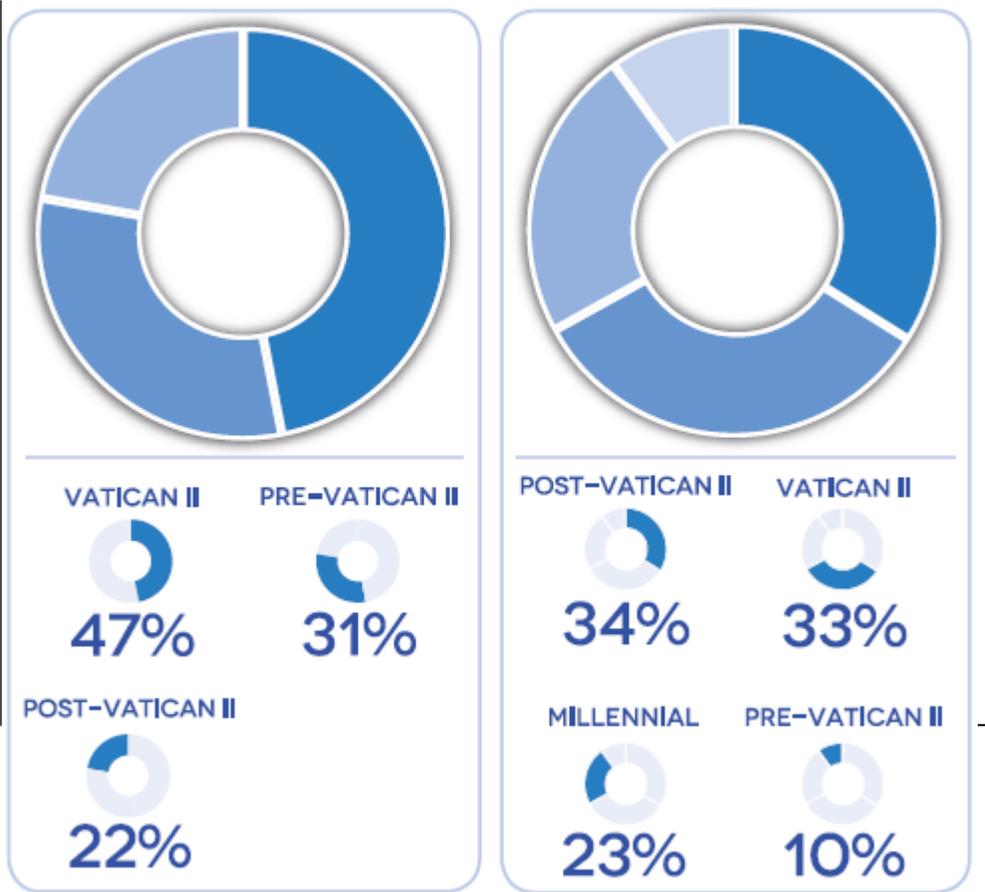
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**FIGURE 1**





**TABLE 2**

<b>PERSISTENCE AND CHANGE</b>				
AMONG CATHOLICS, WITHIN AND ACROSS GENERATIONS, 1987-2011				
	PRE-VATICAN II	VATICAN II	POST-VATICAN II	MILLENNIAL
<b>WEEKLY MASS ATTENDANCE</b>				
1987	58%	40%	30%	--
1993	63%	42%	27%	--
1999	64%	42%	27%	--
2005	60%	35%	26%	15%
2011	54%	31%	29%	23%
<b>IMPORTANT REASONS FOR GOING TO MASS</b>				
Experiencing liturgy	95%	92%	81%	75%

Feel need for Eucharist	94 	82 	72 	77 
Enjoy company of others	69 	60 	51 	63 
Church requires it	42 	34 	39 	34 

### IMPORTANT REASONS FOR NOT GOING TO MASS MORE OFTEN

I'm just not a religious person	43% 	41% 	38% 	40% 
Family responsibilities	31 	29 	53 	48 
Health reasons	27 	16 	23 	29 
It is not a mortal sin	20 	31 	32 	29 

### I CANNOT IMAGINE BEING ANYTHING BUT CATHOLIC

1993	71% 	54% 	59% 	--
2011	76 	64 	71 	69% 

### BEING CATHOLIC IS A VERY IMPORTANT PART OF WHO I AM

1999	90% 	80% 	78% 	--
2011	76 	64 	71 	69% 

### CHURCH IS AMONG MOST IMPORTANT INFLUENCES ON MY LIFE

1987	61% 	42% 	42% 	--
2011	49 	36 	35 	34% 

### WHAT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO YOU AS A CATHOLIC

#### SACRAMENTS, SUCH AS THE EUCHARIST

1999	90% 	84% 	73% 	--
2005	82 	75 	74 	79% 
2011	70 	67 	62 	56 

#### BELIEF IN JESUS' RESURRECTION

2005	85 	83 	85 	82 
2011	82 	75 	72 	70 

#### HELPING THE POOR

2005	84 	82 	84 	91 
2011	69 	70 	66 	62 

#### CHURCH'S TEACHING ABOUT MARY

2005	79 	77 	71 	63 
2011	73 	68 	62 	56 

#### TEACHING AUTHORITY CLAIMED BY VATICAN

2005	52 	40 	42 	27 
2011	29 	32 	29 	30 

**PERCENTAGE WHO SAY THAT AT THE CONSECRATION THE BREAD AND WINE ACTUALLY BECOME THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST**

2011

69% 61% 64% 57% 

TABLE 3

## CATHOLICS' ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS

ABOUT CHURCH TEACHINGS AND PRACTICES,  
IN PERCENTAGES BY GENERATION

	PRE-VATICAN II	VATICAN II	POST-VATICAN II	MILLENNIAL
<b>CATHOLIC BISHOPS SPEAK OUT ON POLITICAL ISSUES</b>				
<b>PERCENTAGES OF CATHOLICS WHO AGREE STRONGLY OR SOMEWHAT</b>				
<b>BISHOPS' OPPOSITION TO HEALTH CARE REFORM BILL</b>				
	48% 	48% 	54% 	57% 
<b>BISHOPS' SUPPORT FOR IMMIGRATION REFORM</b>				
	71 	66 	80 	80 
<b>BISHOPS' OPPOSITION TO SAME-SEX MARRIAGE</b>				
	66 	49 	50 	49 
<b>PERCENTAGES OF CATHOLICS WHO SUPPORT:</b>				
Role of women as priests	55% 	63% 	63% 	60% 
More government funds to provide health care for poor children	80 	80 	80 	80 
More government funds for the military	58 	57 	52 	51 
Stiffer enforcement of death penalty	58 	65 	63 	64 

Reduce spending on nuclear weapons	77	77	83	84
Further cutbacks in welfare programs	57	52	54	53

**POLITICAL PARTY AFFILIATION**

2005				
Republican	33%	38%	49%	29%
Independent	16	18	17	13
Democrat	51	44	35	58
2011				
Republican	19%	18%	24%	26%
Independent	34	42	42	45
Democrat	48	40	34	30
Republican*	38	40	40	43
Democrat*	62	57	57	55

\*Indicates that those who called themselves Independents but who leaned toward one or the other party were placed in that party, thus reducing the strictly "independent voter" to 3 percent of the sample.

**Source URL (retrieved on 02/21/2017 - 02:16):** <https://www.ncronline.org/news/survey-reveals-generation-shift-catholic-church>

**Links:**

- [1] <http://ncronline.org/node/27171>
- [2] <http://ncronline.org/AmericanCatholics>
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