

Old and new spiritual resources

Michele Dillon | Oct. 24, 2011

Catholics in America



Courtney Yagelski and her mother Laura Yagelski participate in a yoga class at St. Francis of Assisi Church in Triangle, Va., June 28. (CNS/Bob Roller)

Spirituality

Much has been written in recent years about the declining hold of traditional church boundaries on Americans' religious and spiritual beliefs and their understanding of religious truth and how it is mediated. Catholics are not immune to these cultural changes. An overwhelming majority in our survey, 88 percent, agree that how a person lives is more important than whether he or she is Catholic (with 56 percent of these strongly agreeing).

Moderately committed Catholics (90 percent), similar to low-commitment Catholics (89 percent), are more likely than the highly committed (81 percent) to affirm this view, though clearly it is normative across all types of Catholics (see [Figure 7](#)). Nevertheless, despite this openness, Catholics still believe in religious truth. Close to two-thirds, 61 percent, agree that Catholicism contains a greater share of truth than other religions do (with 25 percent of these strongly agreeing). Not surprisingly, highly committed Catholics are more likely to affirm this stance, with 87 percent of them, compared to 61 percent of moderately committed Catholics, agreeing that Catholicism contains a greater share of truth than other religions do.

The continuing significance of an institutionalized Catholic spirituality is reinforced by the finding that 40 percent of our respondents "strongly agree," and an additional 34 percent "somewhat agree," that "the sacraments of my church are essential to my relationship with God." Although still high, the proportion of Catholics, 74 percent, who in 2011 say that the sacraments are essential to their relationship with God is not quite as high as the 81 percent who said so in 2005. Nevertheless, among highly committed Catholics in 2011, a full 100 percent see the sacraments as essential to their personal relationship with God, and among the moderately committed, 75 percent do so. By contrast, only 30 percent of Catholics with low levels of commitment see the sacraments as essential to their relationship with God (see [Figure 7](#)).

The ambiguity attached to religious institutional boundaries seeps into the labels people use when asked to

describe themselves. Close to half (47 percent) of our Catholics say they are religious and spiritual, 13 percent say they are religious but not spiritual, 28 percent say they are spiritual but not religious, and 11 percent say they are neither religious nor spiritual (see Figure 9). We have not asked this question in previous Catholic surveys but we can compare our findings with those from a survey conducted by the General Social Survey in 2008 using a representative sample of Americans, not just Catholics. In that survey, 74 percent of Catholics said either they were religious and spiritual (40 percent) or religious but not spiritual (34 percent) -- compared to the 60 percent in our 2011 survey who chose either of these religious designations. By contrast, 20 percent of Catholics in the 2008 General Social Survey, but 28 percent of our Catholics, said they were spiritual but not religious. The larger percentage in our survey may reflect an increasing tendency among Americans in general to describe themselves as spiritual but not religious.

Additionally, large numbers of Catholics say that they believe in various aspects of New Age spirituality. Forty-two percent believe that there is spiritual energy located in physical things such as mountains, trees or crystals; over one-third (37 percent) believes in reincarnation; and just less than a third (32 percent) believes in yoga, not just as exercise, but as a spiritual practice (see Figure 8). Not surprisingly, highly committed Catholics are less likely than less committed Catholics to believe in spiritual energy, reincarnation, and yoga. It is noteworthy, nonetheless, that between one-fifth and one-third of highly committed Catholics express such beliefs.

The more striking variation comes from ethnicity. Hispanic Catholics are significantly more likely than non-Hispanic Catholics to believe in reincarnation (53 percent versus 29 percent), the presence of spiritual energy in physical things (52 percent versus 38 percent), and in yoga as a spiritual practice (42 percent versus 27 percent). Moreover, among Hispanic Catholics, the highly committed are almost as likely as their least committed peers to believe in reincarnation (43 percent versus 47 percent) and spiritual energy (46 percent versus 52 percent), though they are comparatively less likely to believe in yoga as a spiritual practice (33 percent versus 46 percent). Among non-Hispanic Catholics, women are more likely than men to believe in spiritual energy (44 percent versus 31 percent), and in yoga as a spiritual practice (31 percent versus 23 percent).

What does the emerging cultural tide of being "spiritual but not religious" and believing in non-church-based forms of spirituality portend for the future of American Catholicism? Our study finds that while Catholics are imbibing the changing religious and spiritual environment, they also remain strongly wedded to the church's institutional tradition; recall that 60 percent describe themselves as either religious and spiritual or as religious but not spiritual, and 74 percent say that the sacraments of the church are essential to their relationship with God. Hispanics (52 percent) are more likely than non-Hispanics (34 percent) to strongly agree that the church's sacraments are essential to their relationship with God. Yet, as we also documented, Hispanic Catholics, including those who are highly committed to the church, readily blend participation in the church with a mix of New Age spiritual beliefs and practices.

In sum, our findings suggest that while Catholics are embracing, and most likely will continue to embrace, new spiritual vocabularies and resources, it is also likely that they will continue to maintain a strong foothold in the church and to participate regularly in its sacraments. We will be better able to examine this exploratory hypothesis when we complete our next survey in 2017. That survey will allow us to more fully assess the impact of the Hispanic presence on American Catholicism, as well as the ways in which current cohorts of Hispanics and non-Hispanics alike are construing Catholicism as well as other spiritual resources as they age.

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- [Figure 7](#)
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FIGURE 7

CATHOLICS' VIEWS OF THE BOUNDARIES OF CATHOLICISM

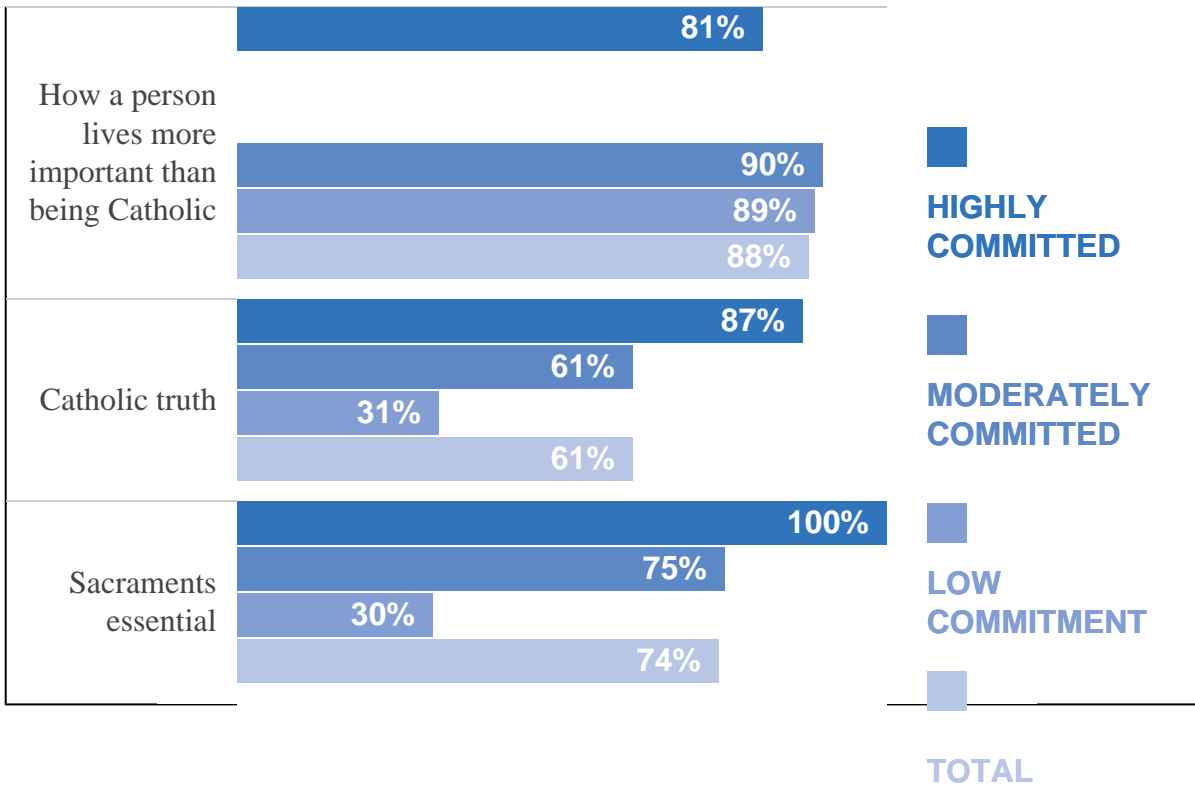
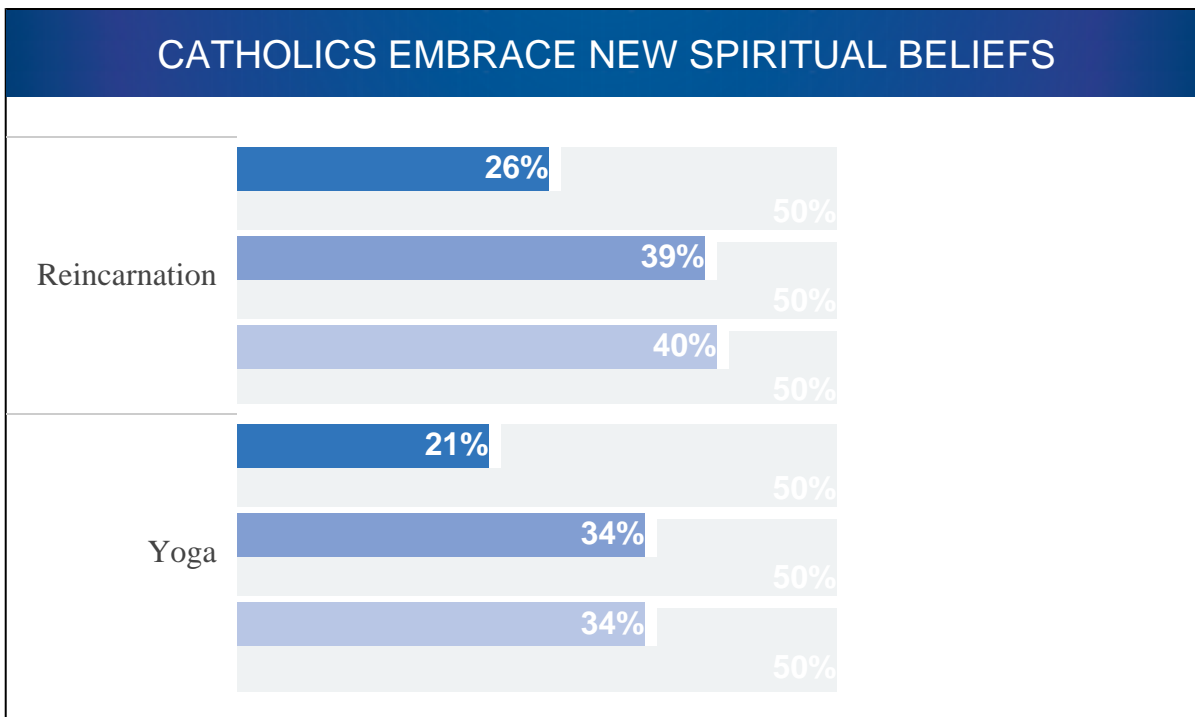


FIGURE 8



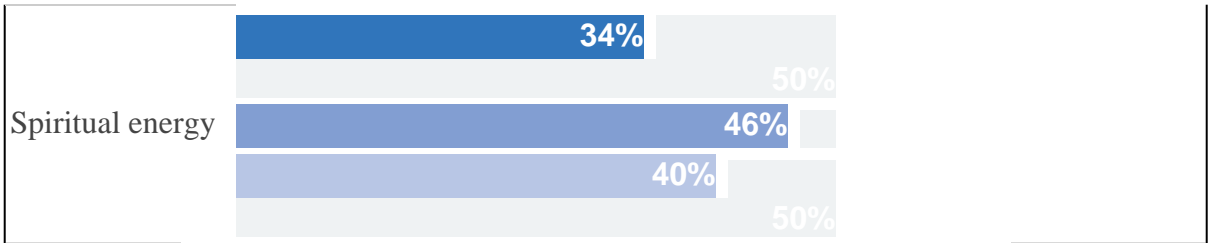
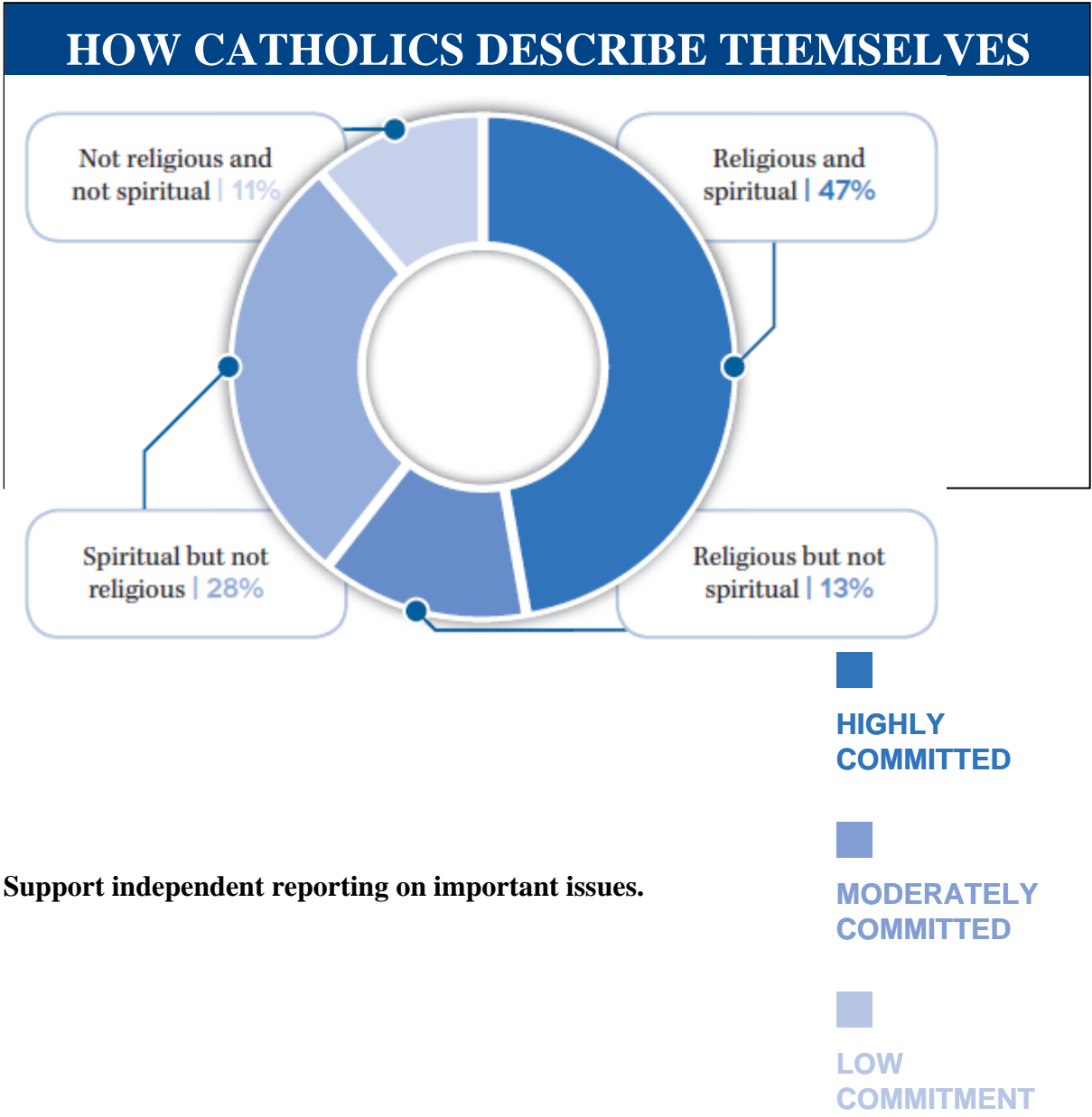


FIGURE 9





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