

Catholic reactions to the sex abuse scandal

The Research Team | Oct. 24, 2011
Catholics in America



People process out of Holy Family Church in Chicago following a June 9 prayer service and make their way to the dedication of a Healing Garden on the church's grounds. The garden was created as a place of prayer and healing for victims of clergy sexual abuse, their families and the Catholic church at large. (CNS/Catholic New World/Karen Callaway)

Abuse

The sexual abuse of minors by priests, both in the U.S. and around the world, continues to generate headlines and media coverage. To help gain a better understanding of Catholics' experiences with and reactions to this issue, our current survey included several new questions on the topic.

Seven percent of Catholics say that they personally know someone who was abused by a priest, and 12 percent say that they personally know a priest who has been accused of abuse ([Figure 10](#)). Older generations of Catholics are more likely than younger Catholics to know someone who has direct personal experience with the sex abuse issue. Fully 10 percent of those in the pre-Vatican II generation say they know someone who was abused by a priest, as do 9 percent of those in the Vatican II generation. Among millennial Catholics, by contrast, only 3 percent say they know someone who was abused by a priest. Similarly, nearly one in five of the pre-Vatican II generation say they personally know a priest who has been implicated in the scandal, as do 16 percent of those in the Vatican II generation. By contrast, fewer than one in 10 millennial Catholics say they personally know a priest who has been accused of abuse.

There is little connection between frequency of Mass attendance and knowing someone who has been abused by a priest, with roughly comparable numbers of regular attenders and infrequent attenders saying they know someone who was abused. Among those who attend Mass weekly, however, more say they know a priest who has been implicated than among those who attend Mass less often. This may reflect that more frequent Mass-goers know more priests than those who attend Mass yearly or less often.

Most Catholics think that the Catholic bishops as a whole have done a fair (38 percent) or poor (31 percent) job

of handling accusations of sexual abuse by priests. Only three in 10 say that the bishops have done a good (24 percent) or excellent (5 percent) job handling the issue. Evaluations of the bishops' handling of the situation are more positive among millennials than among Vatican II and post-Vatican II Catholics, among those who attend church regularly than among those with lower levels of attendance, and among Hispanics than among non-Hispanic Catholics. However, even among those groups who offer the most favorable ratings of the bishops' handling of the issue, the balance of opinion is negative. Among millennial Catholics, for example, 61 percent say that the bishops have done a fair or poor job of handling sex abuse allegations, compared with 36 percent who say they have done a good or an excellent job. And among those Catholics who attend Mass weekly, 61 percent give the bishops a fair or poor rating, compared with 37 percent who give them a good or excellent rating.

Catholics' assessment of the job their own local bishop has done responding to the issue is somewhat more positive than their assessment of the bishops overall. Here again, however, the balance of opinion is negative, with 57 percent of Catholics giving their own local bishop a fair or poor rating for his response to allegations and 41 percent giving their bishop a good or an excellent rating. Weekly Mass attenders stand out from other Catholics for their relatively positive assessments of their local bishop's handling of the issue. More than half of Catholics who attend Mass weekly give their bishop excellent or good marks for his handling of the situation, whereas half or more of those who attend Mass less often give their local bishop fair or poor ratings.

Most Catholics say that the scandal has had a significant impact on the political credibility of church leaders ([Table 4](#)), with more than eight in 10 saying that the issue of sexual abuse of young people by priests hurt the credibility of church leaders who speak out on social or political issues either a great deal (47 percent) or somewhat (37 percent). And three-quarters say that the sexual abuse issue has hurt the ability of priests to meet the spiritual and pastoral needs of their parishioners a great deal (38 percent) or somewhat (39 percent).

Fewer millennials than older Catholics say that the sex abuse issue has had a significant, adverse impact on church leaders' political credibility and the ability of priests to meet the needs of their people. However, majorities of all age groups say the issue has had negative consequences both for church leaders' political credibility and for priests' ability to fulfill the spiritual and pastoral needs of their flock. Similarly, though weekly Mass-going Catholics are less likely than those who seldom or never attend Mass to say the scandal has had a negative impact for church leaders and priests, large majorities of all groups, regardless of their level of Mass attendance, say the scandal has had significant ramifications in these regards. Compared with Hispanics, non-Hispanic Catholics are more likely to say that church leaders' political credibility has been harmed, but there is little difference in the views of non-Hispanics and Hispanics as to the impact of the scandal on the ability of priests to meet the spiritual and pastoral needs of their parishioners.

Despite lasting concerns about the sexual abuse issue, most Catholics give both the U.S. bishops as a whole and their own local bishop positive ratings overall. Seven in 10 Catholics say they are very or somewhat satisfied with the leadership of the bishops of the United States, compared with 28 percent who are only a little or not at all satisfied. And 73 percent of Catholics say they are very or somewhat satisfied with the leadership of their local bishop, compared with 26 percent who are only a little or not at all satisfied.

Though most Catholics are generally satisfied with church leadership, the survey finds a clear link between views of bishops' handling of the sex abuse issue and Catholics' overall assessment of bishops' leadership. Among those who think the bishops have done an excellent or good job handling accusations of sexual abuse by priests, nearly nine in 10 are satisfied with the overall leadership of the bishops, compared with a 64 percent level of overall satisfaction among those who think the bishops have done a fair or poor job handling accusations of abuse. Similarly, many more of those who say their local bishop has done an excellent or good job handling the abuse issue give their local bishop positive ratings overall (91 percent) compared with those who give their local bishop fair or poor marks for his handling of the abuse crisis (60 percent).

Summary

The survey finds a consensus among American Catholics that the bishops have come up short in their handling of the sex abuse issue. And most Catholics say that the issue has hurt both the political credibility of church leaders and the ability of priests to meet the spiritual and pastoral needs of their parishioners. Despite this, most Catholics continue to say that overall they are more satisfied than unsatisfied with the leadership both of the U.S. bishops in general and with the leadership of their local bishop in particular.

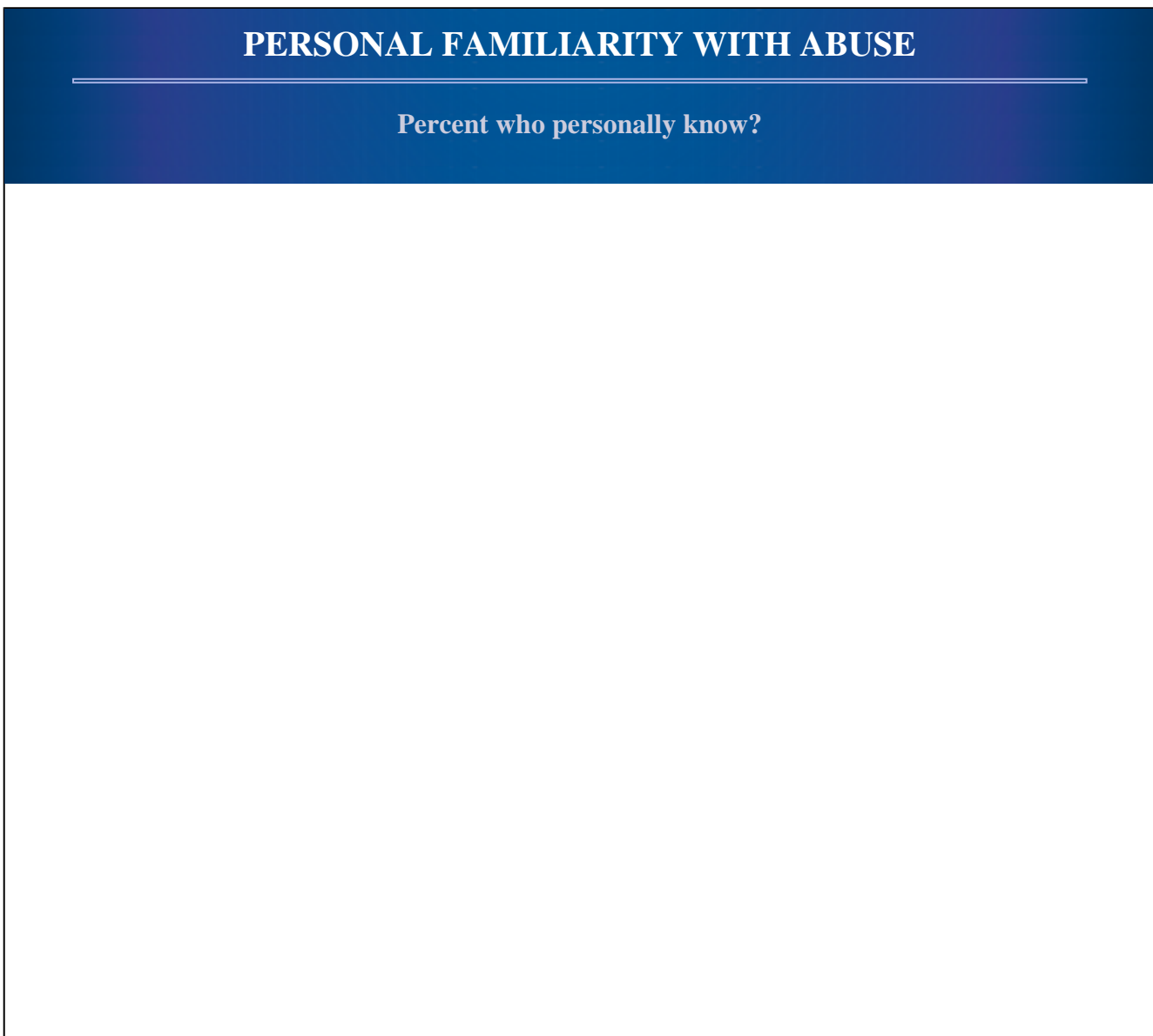
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FIGURE 10



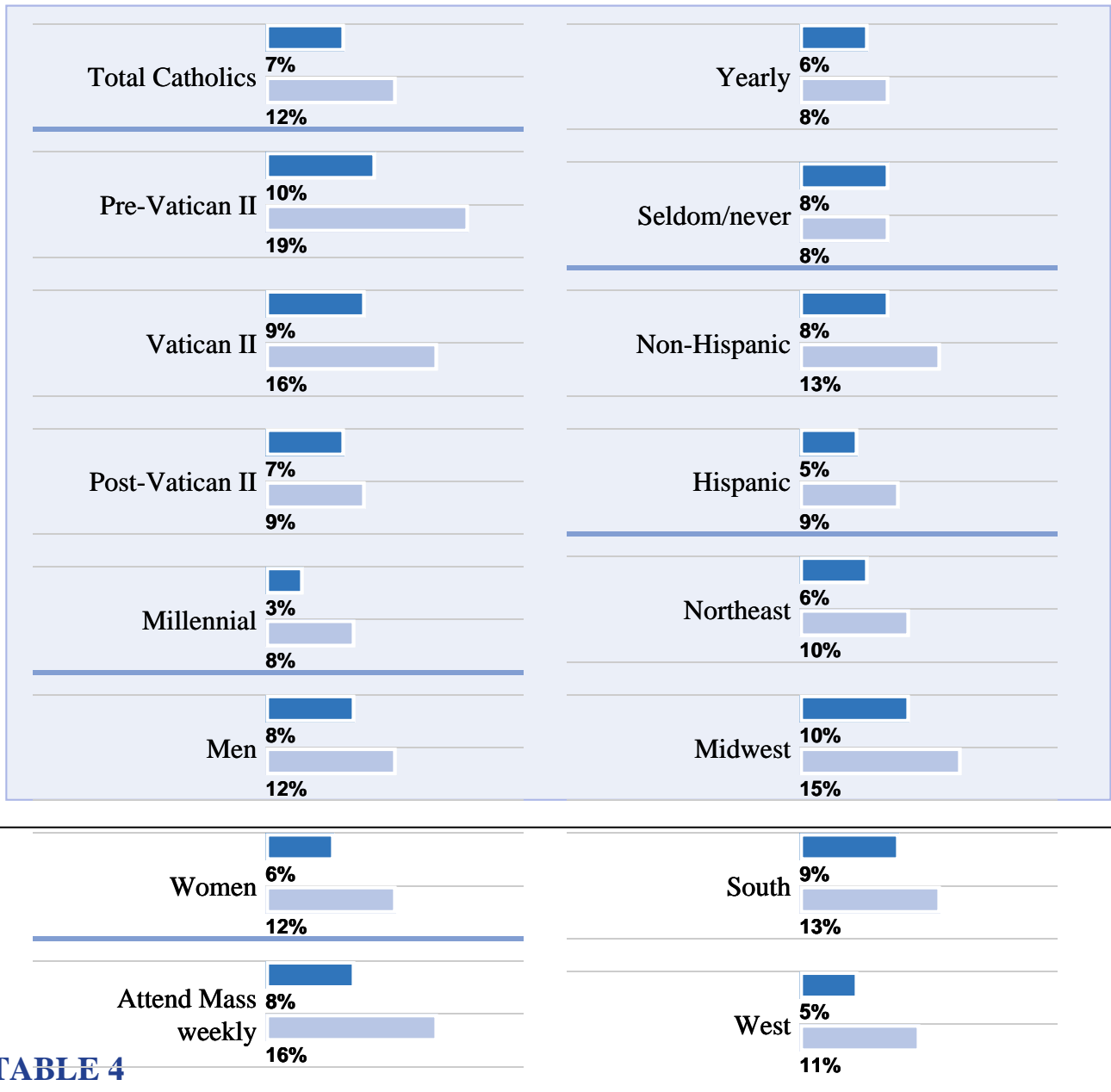


TABLE 4

	IMPACT OF ABUSE SCANDAL ON SOMEONE ABUSED BY PRIEST			
	Sex abuse issue has hurt church leaders' political credibility?		Sex abuse issue has hurt priests' ability to meet spiritual/pastoral needs of parishioners?	
	GREAT DEAL / SOMEWHAT	ONLY A LITTLE / NOT AT ALL	GREAT DEAL / SOMEWHAT	ONLY A LITTLE / NOT AT ALL
Monthly	6%			
Total	83% ●	15% ○	77% ●	22% ○
Pre-Vatican II	89% ●	11% ○	79% ●	21% ○
Vatican II	89% ●	11% ○	82% ●	17% ○
Post-Vatican II	84% ●	14% ○	77% ●	22% ○
Millennial	73% ●	25% ○	68% ●	28% ○
Men	83% ●	15% ○	78% ●	20% ○
Women	84% ●	15% ○	75% ●	23% ○

Yearly	85 ●	14 ●	81 ●	19 ●
Seldom/never	90 ●	9 ●	85 ●	14 ●
Non-Hispanic	87% ●	12% ●	78% ●	21% ●
Hispanic	75 ●	21 ●	74 ●	22 ●
Northeast	87% ●	12% ●	81% ●	18% ●
Midwest	88 ●	12 ●	77 ●	23 ●
South	78 ●	19 ●	73 ●	25 ●
West	82 ●	17 ●	77 ●	21 ●

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