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Feelings toward church reminiscent of Watergate days

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They believe in the ideals, but not the institutions. They are loyal, yet troubled. They are called to obey a complex set of rules, but the powerful seem to live by a different order.

That would be a tight description of Americans during the years of Vietnam and Watergate -- and an apt summary of American Catholics today. That's not a good sign for the church, as it struggles to deal with a scandal that won't go away, and a response from on high that seems inadequate, no matter what is done.

The latest poll published in NCR shows how far American Catholics have moved away from a hierarchy tainted by hypocrisy. Majorities say Jesus' resurrection, helping the poor and the Virgin Mary are the most important aspects of their faith, while the Vatican and the celibate all-male clergy rank at the bottom.

It was the same in the United States in the 1970s, after years of unfolding national scandal. People remained loyal to their country, but withdrew from active participation. They were cynical about the nation's leaders and skeptical about whether America's political elite could ever live up to the lofty ideals taught to everyone since grade school.

The result has been a suspicion of government that continues to the this day -- a blanket suspicion that isn't the healthy questioning vital to a vibrant democracy, but the world-weariness of a downbeat view that assumes the worst and treats the best as remarkable one-time exceptions to the rule. It has not been a good thing for the United States; big problems are left unsolved and blood battles are waged over the smallest matters. Every time it seems we are climbing out of the cynicism of the '70s, something easily pulls us back into the cold.

It will get better; it has been, step-by-step, haltingly. We confronted racism in the 1960s, and elected an African-American president four decades later. The war in Iraq may have been misguided, but those

missteps pale in comparison to the blunders that got us into Vietnam and kept us there, while 50,000 young Americans died and Southeast Asia was torn apart.

How will it end for the church? Polls show despair over leadership is entrenched, and it will take something big to shake that up. But nothing big is talked about in Rome. In politics, people vote their anger by throwing the bums out, or staying away from the voting booth altogether. But in church, they can only stay away, period. The chances are against ever bringing them back.

By and large, the polls of American Catholics portray a group of people too fed up to get angry. Protesting won't work; marches won't change a thing. Many who stay decide to mold a Catholicism that makes sense to them while dismissing anything Rome does. Others don't even seem to have the strength for that much: They just stop.

One thing is clear: The American Catholic Church will change. It will, in years to come, look little as it does now. But will it be more alive, will it find the right path out? Or will it be emptier?

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