

Survey of Catholics illuminates life in the pews

Richard McBrien | Dec. 12, 2011 Essays in Theology

The research team, commissioned by *The National Catholic Reporter* (NCR), which included William D'Antonio of The Catholic University of America (CUA), Mary Gautier of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University and Michele Dillon of the University of New Hampshire, [recently completed the fifth survey of U.S. Catholics](#) [1].

The insert, containing the principal findings of the survey, is published in *NCR's* Oct. 28-Nov. 10 edition under the title "Persistence and Change." The summary essay is written by D'Antonio.

The survey purports to provide "a portrait showing both persistence and change in the beliefs, practices and attitudes of Catholics as they head into the second decade of the 21st century."

The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life issued its extraordinary report in 2009 that one in 10 Americans are former Catholics. (Indeed, if they constituted a separate denomination, it would be the second largest in the United States, after the Catholic Church itself.)

"As is true across all denominations," D'Antonio writes, "the departures appear to be especially heavy among the younger generations." So much for the widespread but mistaken belief that the younger generations are generally conservative.

However, Catholics' share of the U.S. population has remained stable at 24 percent, largely as a result of Hispanic immigration. "In the midst of this fluidity," D'Antonio continues, "no one knows the impact that the growing number of Hispanic Catholics will have on present trends."

When the first survey was conducted in 1987, Hispanics made up only 10 percent of the Catholic population in the United States. Today, Hispanics make up one-third of U.S. Catholics, "with their numbers and proportion expected to continue to grow into the foreseeable future."

"Catholic identity, no longer a matter of simply knowing the Baltimore Catechism and having particular ethnic ties, has become part of the national dialogue between those with a more conservative vision and those who define the church more in terms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and its documents," D'Antonio writes.

The sexual-abuse scandal in the priesthood had dramatically erupted in January 2002 because of a series of investigative articles in *The Boston Globe*. The previous survey in 2005 had to take this scandal into account.

But the findings showed that the scandal had "little measurable impact." The situation changed after six years of new headlines, nationally in Philadelphia and internationally in Ireland, Germany, and Austria. The current survey does take these developments into account.

Of course, demographic trends have also affected parish life. The survey discusses the strengths and weaknesses in current parish structures and implications of changes in Catholic attitudes and behaviors related to parish life.

The survey also studies the impact of Catholic education on U.S. Catholics. The bishops of the United States formally established the Catholic school system in 1884, with the goal that there would be a school in every parish. The public school system was by this time overwhelmingly Protestant.

However, that goal was never met. In fact, fewer than half of parishes ever had a school. The school as the heart of parish life, D'Antonio points out, reached its heights in the 1950s and 1960s. Today, of course, costs are rising, teaching sisters have largely disappeared and schools have been closed.

The survey refers to young adults as millennials, those who came of age in the new century. Special attention is given to areas of Catholic life in which Hispanic and non-Hispanic millennials hold similar and dissimilar beliefs, practices, and attitudes about Catholic identity.

The survey also takes "a long look at the generations, how they have changed over time, and the implications as those [who] have been called the pre-Vatican II Catholics make their final appearance."

Likewise, the survey examines the way political party identification among Catholics has changed over time. In a few words, Catholics have become more Republican and less Democratic as they moved up the economic ladder and as the church became more focused on such issues as abortion at the expense of social justice.

One of the most important findings concerns Catholic beliefs and attitudes toward church authority. A majority of Catholics surveyed say that the locus of moral authority resides with individuals rather than the hierarchy.

Fewer than one in five Catholics now say that the pope and the other bishops are "the proper arbiters of right and wrong," whereas between one-fifth and one-third say that moral authority is "best exercised by individuals and church leaders working together."

I shall be highlighting some of the specific elements of this significant survey in the weeks ahead.

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