NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Study: Black Catholics are more engaged

Jerry Filteau | Feb. 2, 2012

Charlene Ward and her daughter Arym sing in the choir during Sunday Mass at St. Leo Catholic Church in Detroit Dec. 18. (CNS/Reuters/Mark Blinch)

A major new study of African-American Catholics has found that on average they are more religiously engaged than their white Catholic counterparts. They are also better-educated and more economically successful than their African-American Protestant counterparts.

On some educational and socioeconomic scales they exceed or rank equal in achievement with white Protestants, although they still rank below white Catholics.

But in terms of religious engagement and devotion, the African-American Catholics surveyed easily outpaced white Catholics, and the generation gap experienced among white Catholics in those areas -- with younger white Catholics considerably less engaged with the church than their elders -- has not affected younger black Catholics, according to the study.

The country?s younger adult African-American Catholics are more likely than their white counterparts to participate in weekly Mass and be engaged in their parish, the study said.

The full report on the National Black Catholic Survey, conducted last summer, was released to *NCR* in late December.

University of Notre Dame researchers Darren W. Davis and Donald B. Pope-Davis conducted the study, which was cosponsored by the National Black Catholic Congress and the Indiana university?s Office of the President and its Institute for Church Life.

The study is the first ever to focus specifically on African-American Catholics in numbers sufficient to draw statistically reliable national information on their views, attitudes, religious engagement and demographic characteristics, the researchers said.

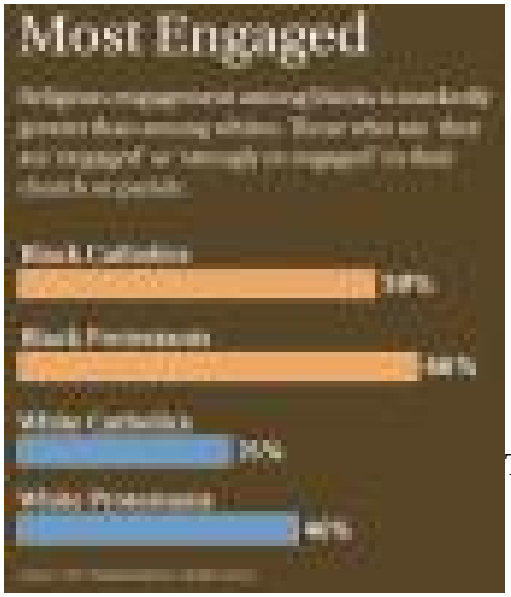
Among the study?s findings were:

- While only 30.4 percent of white Catholics surveyed said they attend church at least once a week, 48.2 percent of the African-American Catholics said they did so. Among those in a predominantly black parish, that number shot up to 57.6 percent, while 33.9 percent of African-Americans in predominantly white parishes said they attended at least weekly.
- About 45 percent of all survey respondents reported household incomes above $60,000. While only 23 percent of all African-American respondents said they earned that much, 44 percent of African-American Catholics reported income above $60,000 -- basically matching the national average of all Americans. Only 20 percent of the African-American Protestants said they were in that income range.
- While half of all African-Americans said their education ended at high school graduation or below, only a quarter of African-American Catholics said their education ended at those levels. Nearly half the Catholics said they attended at least some college, and half of them received a bachelor?s degree, with many going on to graduate school as well.
- In what the researchers attributed primarily to cultural rather than religious differences, adult white Catholics and Protestants were considerably more likely than their African-American counterparts to have married. Nearly three-fourths of white Catholics and Protestants said they were married, widowed or divorced, while barely more than half of African Americans described themselves that way.

?Large racial differences in marital status are evident in the data,? the report said. ?The percentage of African-American Catholics who are married, 39.9 percent, is significantly lower than white Catholics, 53.9 percent.?

The study said that the closer parallel of U.S. black Catholic and black Protestant marriage rates -- 39.9 percent and 35.2 percent respectively -- suggests that within the U.S. black community ?cultural norms may be more of a factor? than religious affiliation in determining approaches to marriage.

On levels of religious engagement -- which the study sought to determine in three distinct areas, spiritual, emotional and social -- it found that African-American Catholics are less engaged than their African-American Protestant counterparts on all those levels, but they are more engaged than their white counterparts, whether Catholic or Protestant.



The level of black-white differences among Christians indicated that whether Catholic or Protestant, ?African-Americans are more religiously engaged? and that the differences can be located in different black and white ?cultural norms? rather than religious norms, the study said.

Social networking through one?s religious community was more important among black Christians generally than among whites and also among black Catholics than among white Catholics. When survey participants were asked whether it was important to them that their friends attended the same church, 36.5 percent of black

Protestants said yes, 28.3 percent of white Protestants said yes, 26.9 percent of black Catholics said yes, but only 8 percent of white Catholics said yes.

Similarly, there were major differences between black and white Catholics on their likelihood of going to a priest for help in dealing with major life or family issues.

On all the issues presented in the survey -- death in the family, marital problems, alcohol problems, sickness, religious education, family problems -- black Protestants were the most likely to say they would seek help from their pastor or minister. Black Catholics were next in most categories and were either ahead of or nearly identical with their white Protestant counterparts.

White Catholics were the least likely to say they would consult a priest on those issues, lagging behind black Catholics by about 20 percentage points.

For example, nearly four-fifths of black Catholics but only three-fifths of white Catholics said they would seek a priest or pastor?s help for a death in the family; more than half of black Catholics said they would ask a priest?s advice on marital problems, but barely more than a quarter of white Catholics would do so.

When asked how important religion was in their life, the vast majority of black Catholics and black Protestants in all adult age groups -- mostly in the 80 percent range -- ranked it strong or very strong. Among white Protestants, about two-thirds to three-fourths ranked it that high.

Among white Catholics, only 71 percent aged 60 and up said religion was a strong or very strong element in their life, and that dropped to 46 percent among white Catholics aged 18-29 and 41 percent among those aged 45-59. White Catholics aged 30-44 showed a slight spike in the importance of religion in their lives, with 55 percent saying it was strong or very strong, but all white Catholic figures were considerably lower than those for all white Protestants or all black Christians.

Less than a fourth of U.S. black Catholics said they thought their church is racist against African-American Catholics, but at the same time less than half -- ranging from 37 percent to 45 percent -- said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the way the church promoted black bishops, emphasized black saints, targeted black vocations, promoted racial integration, supported issues like affirmative action or called attention to problems in Africa.

When asked about perceived racism within their own parish or congregation, nearly a third of black Catholics said they felt uncomfortable at least sometimes because they were the only blacks there. About one-fourth felt they were at least sometimes avoided because of their race, or others were reluctant to shake their hands, or their pastor was insensitive to issues important to their racial group. By contrast, only about one in seven black Protestants perceived such problems in their congregation in any of those four areas.

The survey itself, conducted by Knowledge Networks using address-based scientific sampling methods, had 3,215 respondents in all, of whom 884 were African-American Catholic, 227 white Catholic, 1,079 African-American Protestant, and 1,025 white Protestant.

As a general rule of thumb, sociologists say that any scientific random sampling of 1,000 people in a particular social category will probably bring results representative of that entire population within plus or minus 3 percentage points.

[Jerry Filteau is *NCR* Washington correspondent. His email address is jfilteau@ncronline.org.]

Source URL (retrieved on *04/30/2017 - 00:36*): https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/study-black-catholics-are-more-engaged