

Pew survey: U.S. Catholics split on church's direction, open to a pope from anywhere

Brian Roewe | Feb. 25, 2013

As Pope Benedict XVI faces his final days on the throne of St. Peter, a majority of U.S. Catholics view his papacy favorably, and almost six in 10 have no qualms should his successor come from the developing world or open marriage to priests.

According to a [Feb. 21 study](#) [1] by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 74 percent of Catholics expressed a favorable opinion of Benedict. That three-fourths figure reflected the average favorability Benedict garnered in the United States throughout his pontificate, with his highest approval (83 percent) coming in April 2008 during his five-day visit to New York and Washington, D.C.

While Benedict's favorability remains high, it falls well below that of his predecessor, Pope John Paul II, who averaged approval ratings in the low 90s from 1987-1996.

Looking at specific pieces of Benedict's legacy, Catholics expressed greater satisfaction with his work promoting interfaith relations (55 percent) than with his track record addressing the clergy sex abuse scandal (33 percent), with 63 percent of Catholics saying he had done a poor or fair job. Satisfaction ratings on both issues peaked in light of his U.S. visit.

The Pew Forum conducted the poll Feb. 14-17 by telephone, surveying 1,003 adults (212 Catholics).

As for Benedict's successor, a separate Pew survey found U.S. Catholics agreeable with a possible pontiff from the East or global South, but divided along the lines of change vs. tradition in how the next pope directs the global church.

Six in 10 Catholics said it would be good if the next pope came from South America, Asia or Africa, hinting that geographic biases wouldn't await cardinals Luis Antonio Tagle of the Philippines, Odilo Pedro Scherer of Brazil or Peter Turkson of Ghana should they arise as candidates. About one in five American Catholics said a pope's place of origin would not matter.

Regardless of homeland, half (51 percent) want the next pontiff to maintain traditional church teachings, while the other half (46 percent) believes the church should explore new horizons. [An October 2012 poll](#) [2] conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute found the numbers practically flipped, with 42 percent of Catholics endorsing preservation of traditional values, and 53 percent favoring either an adjustment in practices or an adoption of modern beliefs.

"We can say a slim majority of Catholics say that they would like to see the church either adjust its traditional beliefs or adopt modern beliefs, versus preserve them," Robert Jones, PRRI chief executive, told *NCR*.

But the Pew numbers shift when weighing in Mass attendance, tilting toward tradition among those attending at least weekly (35 percent favoring change, 63 percent favoring tradition), and slightly toward a new direction

among those attending less often (54 percent to 42 percent). College graduation also sways support toward change (60 percent to 38 percent).

Those ascribing change in the church offered variety in how it would manifest.

An open-ended follow-up question found most pro-change Catholics wanting a more modern church (19 percent). Another 15 percent wanted greater crackdown on sexual abuse; 4 percent sought greater attention paid to religion and evangelization; 3 percent were for more focus on social justice issues; and 1 percent supported the church changing by becoming more traditional.

While sought in numerous ways, nearly two-thirds of respondents desired a more open church. Aside from greater openness in general (14 percent), specific avenues included allowing priests to marry (14 percent) and gender equality (4 percent), specifically through women priests (9 percent).

Greater acceptance of homosexuality/gay marriage and birth control/contraception and less strict teachings on heterosexual marriage (divorces, interfaith unions) and abortion all garnered support in the sub-teens.

When provided the scenario of the next pope opening marriage to priests, 58 percent of all Catholics polled said it would be a good thing, as opposed to 35 percent viewing it as a negative. Men (53 percent) and women (61 percent) both affirmed such a move as good; Catholics ages 18-49 (55 percent) and Catholics above age 50 (61 percent) agreed.

As with the change vs. tradition question, Mass attendance swayed viewpoints: Forty-six percent of weekly attendees supported married priests while 43 percent opposed; 66 percent of non-weekly attendees supported married priests, compared to 29 percent who were against it.

The national poll surveyed 1,504 U.S. adults (304 Catholics) between Feb. 13-18.

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