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Study: Most Catholics aren't searching for spirituality online

Carol Zimmermann Catholic News Service | Oct. 14, 2013
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Most U.S. Catholics are not looking for spirituality online; in fact, half of them are unaware the church even has an online presence, according to researchers at Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate.

The most widely used communication tool in Catholic church is the parish bulletin, followed by a diocesan newspaper or magazine -- in print form -- which one in four adult Catholics has read in the last three months, CARA reports.

Narrowing the focus on Catholics who attend Mass each week, CARA said 13 percent of them read Catholic blogs and 17 percent view religious material on YouTube.

These findings and other trends among U.S. Catholics were presented Oct. 10 by CARA's Melissa Cidade, director of pastoral assistance surveys and services, and Mark Gray, director of Catholic polls, to a group of editors in Washington attending a Catholic Press Association/Catholic News Service Liaison Committee meeting.

CARA's communication findings were of particular interest to the group. Robert DeFrancesco, CPA president and editor and associate publisher of *The Catholic Sun*, newspaper of the Phoenix diocese, said the study affirms the good work the Catholic press is doing and also highlights the work they still have cut out for them in balancing print and online efforts.

He said it reveals how "younger Catholics are not clamoring for news online" -- which could be particularly disheartening to Catholic journalists who focus on their online product, but also needs to be balanced with the finding that one in four Catholics overall have read a diocesan paper recently -- primarily in print -- and eight in 10 readers described these papers as good or excellent.

The fact that print versions of diocesan papers still reach so many Catholics is something to think about, he noted, especially with the limited resources of many diocesan newspapers.

In discussion about the CARA findings, participants highlighted the need to continue to find new ways to tell the story of today's church and connect with readers. They said one key way to do this was through continuing to emphasize the words and actions of Pope Francis, who has appealed to so many.

CARA studies on parish life revealed that parish closings across the country have been regionalized. For example, they are closing in the Northeast but growing in the West. Currently there is a 1:1 active ratio of active diocesan priests to parishes and the median age of U.S. Catholics is 53.

One key finding CARA researchers noted was a decrease in number of baptisms, weddings and funerals in the Catholic church in recent years.

They also discussed the multicultural diversity in the church, highlighting aspects of a recent study commissioned by the Secretariat of Cultural Diversity in the Church of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

CARA estimates there are approximately 6,700 multicultural parishes of the more than 17,400 U.S. parishes and three in 10 parishes celebrate at least one Mass a month in a language other than English or Latin.

The study also notes that about 29.7 million U.S. residents who self-identify as Hispanic or Latino are estimated to be Catholic, representing about 59 percent of this population in the United States.

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