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Worldwide poll of Catholics shows a fractured church

Maureen Fiedler | Feb. 11, 2014 NCR Today

What is a pope to do? That's the question raised by a story Monday in *The Washington Post* [1] that highlighted a worldwide poll of Catholics. It shows that the faithful around the world (in general -- not everywhere on all issues) are much more progressive than the Vatican on selected issues.

This poll was commissioned by Univision, the U.S. Spanish-language television network. It included more than 12,000 interviewees in 12 countries that collectively represent about 61 percent of the worldwide Catholic population.

The *Post* story highlighted four issues: clerical celibacy, same-sex marriage, contraception and abortion.

Interestingly, U.S. Catholics disagree with the Vatican on all four issues. This is not news here in the United States for those who follow polling. But for the record, the majority of American Catholics would like to see priests be able to marry, favor same-sex marriage, support the use of contraception, and believe abortion should be allowed in some cases.

As someone who follows polling data, I'm a bit surprised, even skeptical, of the U.S. numbers. For example, the data say 61 percent of U.S. Catholics want priests to be able to marry. Any polling I've ever seen puts that number much higher -- 75 percent or more.

Not surprisingly, Europeans are also progressive, except on same-sex marriage. However, the country breakdown provides some insights. A majority of Spanish Catholics favor it, but Polish and Italian Catholics are mostly opposed, and the French are ambivalent.

Worldwide, the issue of gay marriage (surprisingly, not abortion) is the most contentious, with 30 percent in support and 66 percent opposed. However, these numbers are heavily influenced by the polling from Africa, where only 1 percent favor same-sex marriage and 99 percent say they are opposed. (One of the two countries polled in Africa is Uganda, where laws punish someone for simply being gay or lesbian and where misinformation on this topic is rampant.)

On all other issues, the majority of Catholics polled worldwide would like to see priests be able to marry, approve contraception, and believe abortion should be permitted in at least some cases. A challenge to the church? You bet.

However, when asked to rate the job Pope Francis has been doing, 41 percent gave him an "excellent," 46 percent said "good," only 5 percent said "mediocre," and a mere 1percent said "poor." Politicians can only drool in the face of such numbers!

But the poll at large outlines the challenges faced by Pope Francis in a fractured and fractious church. These are all -- in the broad sense -- "family issues," and that's the topic of the upcoming synod in late 2014. Steering the barque of Peter is no easy job in the face of such numbers!

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[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/pope-francis-faces-church-divided-over-doctrine-global-poll-of-catholics-finds/2014/02/08/e90ecef4-8f89-11e3-b227-12a45d109e03_story.html