

Surveys in the Dumpster

Ken Briggs | Mar. 11, 2014 NCR Today

NCR's admirable reporting startlingly concludes that roughly two-thirds of U.S. bishops haven't broadly sought opinions from lay Catholics on family-related issues prior to the Synod on that subject later this year. The Vatican had promoted the idea by preparing a survey for that purpose, but, as NCR found, most didn't follow through.

Why not if it had Rome's endorsement?

Reasons vary, of course, but the question might as well be, why should they?

First, the bishops were asked to submit a report that could include survey results but didn't have to. What would presumably be the advantage of distributing questions on birth control, divorced and remarried Catholics, marriage, etc., either on the Internet, as some did, or in parish settings? More information, certainly, but the information would be numbingly predictable. For decades, reliable polls have charted Catholic views toward the church's cluster of teachings on sexual ethics. Rejection of those teachings, most starkly against the church's prohibition of artificial birth control, has become an accepted fact. However well intended, the Vatican's survey repeats the exercise and produces the same results. Catholics remain just as opposed to artificial contraception and to forbidding non-annulled, remarried Catholics to receive the sacraments as they have been all along as measured by Pew, Gallup and others.

The church survey therefore confirms the obvious. Any bishop who hasn't been confined to a space capsule for the past 25 years understands this dissent whether or not he admits it. If he is among the few who want change, such findings might bolster his cause. But most don't. Were I among them, why would I stir up a new round of protest?

It gets more complex. Even if I did favor getting the laity involved, what evidence convinces me that anyone takes the laity seriously? Despite the lip service to the concept that no doctrine is completely valid without the approval of the faithful (the idea of an informal referendum or "sensus fidelium") the principle is honored almost entirely in the breach. The logic is that a doctrine or practice can't work if the church at large goes on strike against it, but that is almost impossible in real church life both because the laity is inured to its powerlessness in the chain of command and the hierarchy's tight grip on its sole right to decide truth.

Therefore, even enlisting lay support for desired change cannot realistically be a successful strategy. Catholics have been set against some of those teachings for a long time, to what avail? Yes, but maybe this is the time of deliverance say the hopeful. Maybe the survey itself, rather than the predictable results, is a sign of the times. Fair enough.

If I'm a bishop who embraces the theology of existing teachings on sexuality and believes they reflect the church's essential character, the survey might burden its mission by encouraging mistaken beliefs and therefore sadly mislead those who hold them.

To bishops who don't sympathize with the survey's purposes, the findings, while not new, could become yet another heightening of tension for no good reason.

The survey's existence as a means of rehearsing the old arguments over who decides and whether laity count far exceeds its unremarkable results.

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