

GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN CATHOLIC CONCEPTIONS OF FAITH

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Older Catholics "describe their faith in institutional terms--viewing the Church as an important part of their faith." Younger Catholics express their faith "in individualistic terms, placing more emphasis on personal relationships with God than on involvement in the Church." These are just some of his findings. The study describes the nature and extent of theological pluralism in the Church today, as well as the effect that childhood socialization and the life course experiences have on the way Catholics think about their church.

The study had several phases. Personal interviews and focus groups, for example, addressed differences between the generations of the 1930s and 40s, the 1950s and 60s, and the 1970s and 80s. 2,636 people were surveyed from 49 parishes in Indiana. Also a national telephone poll was conducted of 1,058 Catholics to collect information on the laity's views of faith and morals.

Three types of religious practices were distinguished.

1. Pan-Vatican II practices, such as attending Mass and receiving Holy Communion, both emphasized prior to Vatican II and still expected today.
2. Pre-Vatican II practices, such as saying the rosary and going to private confession, that were customary during the 1940s and 50s but have been de-emphasized since Vatican II.
3. Recent practices, such as reading the bible and group penance, which have been stressed much more in the 30 years since the Council.

Davidson states that "pan-Vatican II beliefs and practices represent the arenas of greatest agreement among Catholics. While Catholics are not of one mind on all of these matters, there are higher levels of adherence to doctrines such as the Trinity and participation in religious practices such as attending Mass than were found in any other areas." Also, "the unity on these matters seems to allow for family feuds in other areas without much concern about schism."

Generational Focus Groups

The fifteen focus groups, five for each age cluster, clearly highlighted generational differences in Catholic's conceptions of faith, with a shift from past uniformity to present pluralism that "has been a movement from an *institutional* to an *individual* conception of faith." The study describes how older Catholics grew up in a Church that offered a system of fixed beliefs and behaviors, many Church organizations, The Latin Mass, meatless Fridays, and an unambiguous religion taught by priests and nuns using the Baltimore Catechism.

Vatican II profoundly changed all that. The world was no longer seen as a hostile place from which the Church offered shelter to Catholics, but instead "the Council urged Catholics to see the Church as a positive force in the world." There came also an emphasis on ecumenism, with its acknowledgement of the positive in other religions. In addition, there were new efforts to provide "the people of God" more say in Church affairs, encouraging individual responsibility for one's own faith and a concomitant "emphasis on the integrity of one's own conscience."

The generation of the 1930s and 40s “view their faith primarily in institutional terms.” For them, “the church is seen as a mediating force in their relationship with God,” and they believe that “Catholic identity, participation in the sacraments, and overall commitment to the church are essential to relating with God.” Also, “they see little difference between involvement with the Church and relating to God because the two are deeply interconnected.”

The generation of the 1950s and 60s, those who came of age during Vatican II, have religious opinions that represent attitudes of both the earlier and later generations. However, “many describe their faith as less institutionally based than those who came of age before them.”

The generation of the 1970s and 80s, the post Vatican II generation, has highly individualistic views of faith and tend to define “church” in ways very different from the older generations. They tend to “view their faith in largely individualistic terms, downplaying the need for mediation of the church in their relationship with God.” They express considerable concern about spirituality, their personal relationship with God which may well be separate from the church, and about being a good person. These young Catholics have been taught they are on personal “faith journeys,” with the church available to help them along the way rather than serving as an end in itself. Most, therefore, “do not describe the church as an essential component of their faith.” As one participant said: “My spirituality is more important to me than my religion, and I can be spiritual anywhere. In fact, I am more spiritual walking in the woods than I am walking down the main aisle of the church.”

Implications for the Future

Davidson notes:

“Our findings are likely to concern church leaders. Well-documented declines in priestly vocations and religious orders seem even more ominous when listening to the post-Vatican II generation. As the shortage of priests, sisters, and brothers suggests a need for greater participation of lay persons in active leadership roles, one is left wondering whether today’s young Catholics will be willing to take on such institutional responsibilities. Our research, of course, cannot conclusively answer this question. While it appears that post-Vatican II Catholics do not embrace institutional commitment to the church, instead preferring a more personal brand of faith, there is diversity within the generation. D’Antonio et al. (1996) have found that women and persons with the most Catholic schooling are the most highly committed members of the post-Vatican II generation, but they also are more likely to disagree with church teachings than men and Catholics with less Catholic schooling. This paradox suggests that today’s young Catholics who are most likely to profess an interest in working to maintain the institutional church will also present challenges to the hierarchy and conventional understandings of what it means to be Catholic.”