

WHAT UNITES AND DIVIDES CATHOLICS

Prepared By: Dr. Michael McCallion - (10-9-97)
Department of Parish Life / Pastoral Resources (313-237-5760)

The various findings reported below are taken from:

Davidson, James D, et al. 1997. The Search for Common Ground: What Unites and Divides Catholic Americans. Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc.

1. In an average week, 83% of parishioners pray privately, 57% attend Mass, and 48% receive Holy Communion. Fiftyone percent say they attend Holy Days of Obligation on a regular basis.
2. Two-thirds of Catholics are registered parishioners; one-third are not.
3. In general, parishioners are more religiously active and more likely to agree with Church teachings than non-parishioners are. Catholics without parishes are less active in the Church, more inclined to disagree with specific Church teachings, a more willing to embrace ideas that are incompatible with Canon Law.
4. Eighty to 90% of parishioners report that “pan-Vatican II” doctrines about Mary as the Mother of God, the Incarnation, Resurrection, Trinity, and Real Presence are important parts of their personal faith. These represent the area of greatest consensus among parishioners.
5. At least half of U.S. parishioners still accept traditional beliefs about the Catholic Church being the “one true Church,” the pope being the Vicar of Christ on earth, and the need to obey Church teachings even if one does not understand them.
6. Between one-quarter and one-third of parishioners continue to practice traditional devotions such as praying for the intercession of Mary and the saints, saying the rosary, and going to private confession at least two or three times a year.
7. Though parishioners are less likely than non-parishioners to disagree with Church teachings, 57% of parishioners think it would be a good idea to ordain women. Just as many accept another idea that conflicts with Canon Law, namely that one can be a good Catholic without going to Mass on a regular basis. Even higher percentages of non-parishioners accept these ideas.
8. Few parishioners read the Bible (22%), attend Bible studies (14%), or participate in prayer groups (8%).
9. Only a minority of parishioners agree with the Church’s sexual and reproductive ethics. The percentage of parishioners saying that each action is “always wrong” drops from 41% on homosexual actions to 39% on abortion, 33% on premarital sex, and only 9% on artificial birth control.
10. Parishioners agree in principle with the Church’s social teachings (over 90% say that helping the needy is an important part of their own religious beliefs), and 58% accept the idea that Catholics have a special responsibility to help close the gap between the rich and poor; 42% disagree or are unsure about closing this gap.
11. Overall, parishioners’ views of faith and morals form a rather loosely integrated Catholic worldview. Several dimensions (e.g., traditional beliefs and practices) cluster together quite well; others (e.g., recent practices and social teachings) overlap somewhat; and some (e.g., recent ideas and recent practices) tend to be at odds with each other.

Who, then, are the most committed parishioners? They tend to be members of the pre-Vatican II generation, people who were religious as children, people who have had personal experiences of God’s love in their adult lives, and people who are relatively well informed about matters such as Vatican II.

They also have had parents who talked with them about religion and religious role models as religious instructors.

WHAT UNITES AND DIVIDES CATHOLICS

Prepared By: Dr. Michael McCallion - (10-9-97)
Department of Parish Life / Pastoral Resources (313-237-5760)

The various findings reported below are taken from:

Davidson, James D, et al. 1997. The Search for Common Ground: What Unites and Divides Catholic Americans. Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc.

ACTION IMPLICATIONS

1. Birth cohort was the most important attribute examined in this study. Young Catholics born and raised in the 1970s and 1980s do not express much interest in recent practices such as Bible study and prayer groups. These devotional practices, which require preparation, are collective in nature, and include public disclosure on one's beliefs, may not be as well suited to the post-Vatican II generation's rather individualistic approach to faith and morals as more traditional and private devotions such as the rosary and Stations of the Cross (c.f., *The Catholic Devotional*, 1996).

Race, ethnicity, and gender contribute a bit to pluralism in today's Church, but their impact is relatively small and often tied to cohort effects. Our evidence, quite consistently shows that cohort differences are simply larger than racial, ethnic, and gender differences. Older white males with European ancestry have more in common with older female African Americans than they do with younger white males and younger females of color. Conversely, younger people of color have more in common with younger whites than they do with older people of color and older whites.

Catholics raised in the 1930s and '40s, 1950s and '60s, and 1970s and '80s were raised in very different societal conditions. While the oldest cohort experiences economic depression and World War II during its formative years, the middle cohort experienced the prosperity of the post-war years and the social movements of the 1960s; the youngest cohort experienced the economic polarization and social dilemmas of the last 20 years. The cohorts also experienced three very different types of Catholicism: the pre-Vatican II church, the Vatican II Church, and the post-Vatican II Church. As a result, they learned very different approaches to religion early in their lives.

These cohort differences point to declining levels of childhood religiosity, closeness to God, and commitment to the Church. Young Catholics are less religious in childhood than their parents and grandparents; they report fewer experiences of God's presence in their lives; and they are less committed to the Church. ***Unless steps are taken, these trends portend a future of dwindling faithfulness among young Catholics, diminishing awareness of God's presence, further erosion of Catholic identity, and a declining sense that the Church is worth supporting.*** These trends, in turn, signal a continuation of recent tendencies to disagree with traditional faith and morals and to embrace religious ideas that are incompatible with Church teachings.

Whether theologically liberal or conservative, members of our research team agree that some elements of this scenario threaten the longterm viability of the Church.

An important implication is that in the effort of the Church to appreciate social and cultural diversity, parish and diocesan leaders need to pay at least as much attention to cohort differences as they do to racial, ethnic, and gender differences. Meetings that take racial, ethnic, and gender differences into account and overlook cohort differences will fail to address one of the largest communication gaps in the Church today. Church leaders should do everything possible to make sure that Catholics in all three birth cohorts -- and who reflect the prevailing views of their cohort -- are fully represented at conferences and on committees.

Another implication is that it may be easier to build bridges between Catholics of different races, ethnic traditions, and genders than it is to build them between Catholics belonging to different birth cohorts. Cohorts have different approaches to learning and communicating. Pre-Vatican II Catholics have tended to learn through reading; post-Vatican II Catholics have learned through television and computers (Zukowski, 1996). Given cohort differences in learning styles, church leaders also should experiment with contemporary means of communication. We think an Indiana bishop who uses e-mail to carry on conversations with young people in his diocese is on the right track, as well as cassette tapes to listen to in their cars. So may need different methods in bridging cohorts.

2. Upbringing (Lay / Professional Split): Often there is tension between parents and Church leaders today. Parents often think that catechists and religious educators are not realistic, or to feel inadequate in terms of

their spiritual responsibilities to their children. They also lead catechists and religious educators to question parents' commitment to their children's religious formation, or to feel disappointed when it seems that parents are shirking their responsibilities. One way to address these tensions would be for Church leaders to conduct focus groups with parents on a regular basis - one with dual career parents, another with single parents, etc. Parents often feel they do not have the expertise in religion that they do in other areas so they tend to turn over a great deal of their responsibility over to Church leaders. And this dependency probably will increase in the years ahead.

There are increased number of dual-career and single-parent families in many parishes; indications that today's parents spend less time with their children than their parents spent with them 20 to 30 years ago; plus parents feel they don't know enough about Catholic faith and morals and so they will turn to church leaders more than ever before. *Ironically, these increased demands will take place at precisely the same time that there are fewer priests and religious and the pool of available teachers includes a growing number of young lay Catholics who do not feel equipped to carry out these responsibilities. Thus, the recruitment and training of religious educators will be more important than at any time in memory. Dioceses and parishes will need to do more than ever before to find competent teachers and to prepare catechists and religious educators for their roles in nurturing childhood religiosity.*

Moreover, in focus groups, both older and younger Catholics expressed concerns that young Catholics are not learning basic truths. Hence, we found some data to support Wilkes' (1996:xix) observation that "an entire generation of Catholic born children have been raised with little knowledge or understanding of the religious beliefs that shaped their parents and the American Catholic ethos. We are now witnessing the rise of the best secularly educated group of cradle Catholics ever born -- and, religiously, the least literate." Hence, leaders might try to identify the best features of religious education programs offered in pre-Vatican II and post-Vatican II years. Without introducing the coercion that often accompanied pre-Vatican II religious education, Church leaders might link yesterday's attention to Church teachings with today's emphasis on self-expression. Shared Christian doctrines such as the Incarnation and Resurrection and uniquely Catholic doctrines such as the Real Presence and Mary as the Mother of God provide a solid foundation for childhood religiosity.

Youngsters need prayers to help them talk with God and they need to participate in the sacraments so they can experience a sense of the sacred in their childhood years. Nevertheless, parents need to lead the way in family religious activity including grace at meals, Advent and Lenten ceremonies, telling stories about saints, hanging religious pictures and saying bedtime prayers. These activities are relatively inexpensive and don't require a great deal of time.

3. Upbringing - What to do?: What can catechists and religious educators do to nurture childhood religiosity? First of all, they need to think of themselves as key members of a larger network of people, all of whom relate to young people. Members of this network often relate to children in different ways. Without self-conscious efforts to address the forces that pull parents and Church leaders in different directions, these conditions can produce tension between them. They can lead parents to think that catechists and religious educators are not realistic, or to feel inadequate in terms of their spiritual responsibilities to their children. They also lead catechists and religious educators to question parents' commitment to their children's religious formation, or to feel disappointed when it seems that parents are shirking their responsibilities. Hence, Church leaders could conduct focus groups with parents on a regular basis. These focus groups should include parents in relatively similar social circumstances. For example, one focus group might deal with dual-career parents, another with single parents and discuss roles in nurturing children's religiosity. Discussions could revolve around parents' religious practices at home, issue of time, what parents think are their strengths and weaknesses, and what parents expect of catechists and the Church.

4. Stratification: Diocese and parishes will need significant resources to accomplish these tasks. These needs point to an important dilemma. Murnion's (1992) study of lay ministers indicates a stratification of Catholic parishes. Some are affluent, have educated and multi-talented members, and have lots of other resources to work with (money, facilities, and latest equipment). Other parishes have far fewer resources to work with. These inequalities can foster very unequal opportunities to grow in faith. To give all our

kids a more even chance to experience God in their childhood years, dioceses and parishes may want to form partnerships that allow them to share teachers, classrooms, and materials.

5. Homilies: In recent years, there has been increased emphasis on experiential and story-telling forms of interpretation that are often quite persuasive. However, we found that they also can be ahistorical and seldom provide opportunities to forge connections among scripture readings, conciliar documents, and recent encyclicals -- all of which communicate God's love and interpret his presence in the modern world. In line with Fee et al. (1981) and Greeley's (1990) emphasis on the importance of good preaching, we believe that training in, and use of, various homiletic approaches are steps toward fostering close relationships with God and parishioners' awareness of major developments such as Vatican II. When priests do not talk about Vatican II in their homilies and other Church leaders do not promote knowledge of the Council, they create a vacuum in which ideas that are quite contrary to Church teachings can flourish. Our data suggest that awareness encourages appreciation of Catholicism's worldview.

6. Church Leaders: In our study we distinguish between self-concept and self-interest, but in the real world the two tend to go hand in hand. Church leaders, however, tend to think in terms of self-concepts than self-interests in evaluating parishioners' approaches to the faith, that is, leaders think about the laity's religious identity and not the costs and benefits of belonging to the Church. They do so because identity and self-concept tend to be seen as legitimate and noble motivations whereas self-interests are not (selfish). Here again we find a professional / lay split or gap in attitudes and overall orientation to religion.

Leaders who want to forge common ground and perpetuate a Catholic worldview need to take religious identity and religious self-interest seriously. Know full well that parishioners will respond to their efforts in quite different ways, we feel leaders should stress the value of a strong Catholic identity and the need to invest time and money in the Church in exchange for the benefits it provides. The more Church leaders promote a strong Catholic identity and a willingness to support the Church with time and money, the more they will increase the laity's inclinations to value Church teachings.

It is a mistake to stress our common Christian heritage without also calling attention to what gives Catholics their distinctive identity. It also is a mistake to rob Catholics of a sense of belonging to a church that deserves -- indeed, needs -- their support. Such mistakes leave Catholics -- especially young Catholics, who live in a much more ecumenical world -- feeling vulnerable. They report feeling unprepared when members of other faiths criticize or ask them questions about Catholicism.

7. Leaders also should provide action-oriented programs that start with behavioral commitment and are geared ultimately to changing people's attitudes, such as social outreach and peace ministries. Previous research indicates that parishes invest relatively few resources in such programs (Leege and Trozzolo, 1985; Leege, 1986; Rafferty and Leege, 1989; Gremillion and Leege, 1989; Davidson, Mock and Johnson, 1997). For example, very few parishes have a full-time staff person in social ministry, designing community-oriented opportunities for social service and advocacy. Most spend less than 5 percent of their budgets on outreach programs. The lack of programs of this type deprives some parishioners of opportunities to act themselves into new ways of thinking. Previous research also indicates that at least half of parishioners are not involved in any Church activities (Rafferty and Leege, 1989). Our study of Indiana parishioners indicates the same thing. So, Church leaders need to get beyond Parish-based ministries and into other environments: colleges, workplaces, retirement communities, fitness and recreation centers, hospitals, and special-purpose organizations. We need innovative forms of ministry and creative resourcing.

PAN-VATICAN II, PRE-VATICAN II and POST-VATICAN II BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

1. PAN-VATICAN II:

Beliefs: Doctrines such as the Trinity, Incarnation, and the Resurrection have been part of the Catholic tradition for centuries and remain essential Church teachings today. They were not subject to negotiation at Vatican II, nor were they changed. That's why we call them "pan-Vatican II" beliefs. They are still considered basics of the Catholic faith, just as they were before the Council.

Catholic parishioners attach considerable importance to all of the pan-Vatican II beliefs. 92% believe Mary is the Mother of God. 92% believe Jesus was completely divine like God and completely human like us in every way except sin. 92% believe Jesus physically rose from the dead. 88% believe that in the Mass the bread and wine actually become the Body and Blood of Christ. 79% believe in three persons in one God.

In short, though pan-Vatican II beliefs are often overlooked in surveys and do not get much attention in news stories about American Catholics, they are a very salient dimension of faith for most parishioners. The tendency for Catholics to value these beliefs suggests they are an important point of common ground among Catholics who may differ on other issues.

Practices: Catholicism puts a lot of emphasis on religious practices -- so much so that people in our interviews and focus groups were more likely to use the concept of "practicing Catholic" than "believing Catholic" to describe a committed Catholic. When people think of Catholic practices, they think of attending Mass, receiving Holy Communion, praying privately, and attending Holy Days of Obligation. The Church stressed regular participation in these practices prior to Vatican II, and they remain normative today. That is why we call them "pan-Vatican" practices. 83% report praying privately at least once a week; 57% say they attend Mass at least once a week; 51% attend Holy Days of Obligation regularly; 48% receive Holy Communion once a week.

2. PRE-VATICAN II:

Beliefs: We asked parishioners about 3 beliefs that were the hallmarks of the pre-Vatican II Church: The church as the one true Church; the Pope as the Vicar of Christ; and the laity's need to obey. 82% agree Pope is Vicar of Christ; 59% believe the Catholic church is the one true Church; 52% agree it is important to obey Church teachings even if they don't understand them. Thus, though the Church placed more emphasis on authority and obedience before the Council than it does these days, pre-Vatican II beliefs persist among a sizable number of Catholics.

Practices: These include, saying the rosary, starting and ending each day with prayer, practicing devotions to Mary and the saints, and going to private confession. Many of these practices were quite personal, could be done at home, and did not require

much time or preparation. These practices were normative prior to Vatican II, but have not been emphasized as much since the Council. That's why we call them "pre-Vatican II" practices. 72% start and end their day with prayer; Only 35% practice devotions to Mary and the saints; Only 27% pray the rosary; and only 25% to private confession several times a year.

3. POST-VATICAN II:

Beliefs: Increased emphasis on freedom of conscience and personal responsibility for one's own faith. These have given rise to a number of new ideas and beliefs, some of which are at odds with Church teachings. Such as, the need to attend Mass on a regular basis; why priesthood should be reserved to celibate males. 57% think one can be a good Catholic without going to Mass; 57% also feel women should be allowed to be priests. Much has changed as well in beliefs about sexual and reproductive ethics. 41% believe homosexual acts are always wrong; 39 % agree with the Church on abortion; 33% believe premarital sex is always wrong; Only 9% view that use of condoms and pills for birth control is always wrong.

Practices: Pre-Vatican II church did not encourage the laity to read the bible, etc but things have changed. Church leaders have lessened their emphasis on traditional practices such as novenas and rosaries and introduced a variety of new scripture oriented practices. Catholics are now encouraged to read the bible, participate in Bible study, and belong to prayer groups. Most of these practices require preparation and meetings at church or in homes. We call them "recent practices" or post-Vatican II practices to reflect the new-found emphasis the church has given to these devotional forms. But not many parishioners are participating: 22% read the Bible at least once a week; only 14% attend prayer groups or faith sharing groups; 8% attend Bible study at least once a month. One reason for the low participation is the requirement of time and preparation

CONCLUSION: Pan Vatican II beliefs are the area of greatest unity among Catholics. Church leaders are not creating controversies around these central faith issues, and the laity are not quarreling with the church over these matters. Hence, they are hardly covered in the media. They are the single most important basis of Catholic unity. They are the glue that holds Catholics together. They are the reason why Catholics remain loyal to the church, even when they disagree with it on other matters.

Social teachings represent another area of common ground. Most Catholics embrace the principle of concern for the poor. Parishioners may disagree on specific social policies, but very few reject the Church's emphasis on a "preferential option for the poor."

Pan-Vatican II practices and pre-Vatican II beliefs are other spheres of convergence. Close to half of parishioners score "high" on these indices, and about one-third score "medium." Though there are important variations in pan-Vatican II practices, Catholics link their faith to practices such as prayer, Mass attendance, and Holy Days of Obligation.

The area where Catholics score lowest of all is post-Vatican II practices. Despite Church leaders' efforts to institutionalize practices such as Bible reading, Catholics have been slow to embrace them. Parishioners are not inclined to think of these forms of devotion when they think of practicing their faith.

When we examine the relationships among these spheres of faith and morals, we see that four areas (pan-Vatican II beliefs and practices, and pre-Vatican II beliefs and practices) cluster together rather nicely, forming a relatively distinct pattern of traditional belief and practice.