

Most U.S. Catholics ambivalent about Latin Mass

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WASHINGTON -- Nearly two-thirds of U.S. Catholics surveyed said they have no opinion on the increased availability of the Tridentine Mass since Pope Benedict XVI made it easier for parishes to offer the traditional liturgy two years ago.

Overall, 63 percent of Catholics held a neutral opinion about the availability of the Tridentine Mass, according to findings released Aug. 24 by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, a research center based at Georgetown University in Washington.

The survey found that nearly three in 10 Catholics -- 29 percent -- who do not oppose bringing back the Tridentine Mass would attend such a liturgy if it was available at convenient times and locations. CARA said the number represents about 11 percent of all U.S. Catholics, or about 5.7 million individuals.

"Such a large segment of the Catholic population has no experience of this; they tend to have no opinion," said Mark Gray, a research associate at the center. For "even some people who attended this Mass as children, the interest has faded a bit," he added. "It's not negative. They just have no opinion."

Of the survey's 1,007 Catholic respondents, those who favor having the traditional Mass offered more widely outnumbered those who oppose the increased availability of the Tridentine rite by more than a 2-1 ratio, or 25 percent to 12 percent.

"It's an experience people don't know. There's some interest in the novelty of it certainly for some people who are neutral or positive about it and there is an interest in actually experiencing it," Gray told Catholic News Service.

Pope Benedict, in a July 2007 apostolic letter, "Summorum Pontificum," said that Mass celebrated according to the 1962 Roman Missal, commonly known as the Latin or Tridentine rite, should be made available in every parish where groups of the faithful desire it. In his letter, the pope said the Mass from the Roman Missal in use since 1970 remains the ordinary form of the Mass, while celebration of the Tridentine Mass is the extraordinary form.

The pope's letter allowed the Tridentine Mass to be celebrated without a priest first getting a bishop's approval. The statement updated the 1984 decision of Pope John Paul II that allowed the Tridentine liturgy to be celebrated with the local bishop's approval.

The CARA survey was patterned after a 1985 Gallup Poll, replicating the questions while making slight alterations to reflect changed events, such as the election of Pope Benedict in 2005.

In contrast with the CARA survey, the 1985 poll indicated that 25 percent of Catholics had no opinion on the availability of the Tridentine Mass. At that time, 35 percent of respondents opposed the return of the traditional rite while 40 percent favored it.

The responses in the CARA study varied based on the frequency of Mass attendance. Among the strongest supporters for the return of the Tridentine Mass were weekly Massgoers, with 33 percent favoring its availability. Among those who attend Mass a few times a year or less often, 21 percent favored increasing its availability.

The survey also showed that 47 percent of those who attend Mass weekly had no opinion on the Tridentine Mass while 20 percent of the same group opposed wider availability of the rite.

Catholics born between 1943 and 1961 indicated the greatest support for the traditional liturgy at 32 percent. Only 13 percent of that age group opposed the rite. Thirty percent of Catholics born before 1943 supported the Tridentine Mass while 24 percent opposed it.

Younger generations -- those born between 1961 and 1981, who came of age after the Second Vatican Council, and those born since 1982, who are considered the millennial generation -- had the lowest level of support for the Tridentine Mass being made more widely available, at 21 percent and 16 percent, respectively.

Support for the Tridentine Mass was highest among people holding a graduate degree (43 percent) and those who were political independents (37 percent). Republicans (27 percent) and those who leaned Republican (33 percent) were more likely to support the old rite than Democrats (27 percent) and those who leaned Democrat (10 percent).

Women also favored the increased availability of the Tridentine Mass more than men did: 28 percent to 23 percent.

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The survey, taken in February 2008, has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.

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