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Catholics want women religious to speak out on policy issues

Tom Roberts | Jun. 4, 2010

Sister Simone Campbell, Director of Network

Most Catholics in the United States view women religious as strongly contributing to building the church and maintaining its mission and as having a right to speak out publicly on important cultural and religious issues, according to a recent survey.

The survey, conducted in May by Knowledge Networks, showed that American Catholics have a ?very positive image? of religious sisters, said William D?Antonio, fellow at the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies at Catholic University in Washington. The poll also showed Catholics had little concern about the ongoing Vatican investigation of women?s religious orders.

D?Antonio said the idea for the survey ? three questions with a range of possible answers ? emerged after a non-scientific in-house poll in the magazine U.S. Catholic showed readers responding with a highly positive view of women religious.
The survey was done in light of critical comments made by some in the Catholic hierarchy about nuns, particularly U.S. sisters who supported health care reform, and as a controversial Vatican investigation of nuns is taking place.

In the survey, 53 percent of Catholics responded that women religious ?should follow their consciences and make public statements concerning the church and society.? Fifteen percent said they ?should make public statements only if they support the teachings of the Vatican and the bishops,? while 3 percent replied that they ?should never make public statements, but should limit themselves to prayer and service.?

A second question asked how Catholics perceived the nuns, and respondents were allowed to check off no more than three responses. Seventy percent of the respondents perceived women religious as women who founded and serve in schools and hospitals. The same number, 70 percent, also saw them as women who serve the poor, while 68 percent said they ?have taken important roles in parishes.? Only 4 percent (all men) saw them as ?Women who have not done much.?

The third question asked Catholics their opinion about the Vatican inquiry into the quality of life of sisters and nuns. If the investigation has raised objections in some Catholic quarters, it was of little concern to those

surveyed. Nearly half ? 46 percent -- said they had no opinion on the matter; 15 percent said the Vatican should investigate if it wants to,? while another 11 percent said the inquiry ?is something I would expect the Vatican to do? nothing special." The other three response categories (totaling 20%) questioned the reason for the visit. The survey, made possible by a grant from the Rotondaro Family Foundation, was conducted by Knowledge Networks with a nationally representative sample and has a margin of error of plus or minus 6-7 percentage points. The survey was conducted using the web-enabled KnowledgePanel, a probability based panel designed to be representative of the U.S.

In an interview, D?Antonio explained that Knowledge Networks (knowledgenetworks.com), is a new type of survey organization that maintains a vast pool of people representative of the U.S. population and of a wide range of characteristics within that population who have previously agreed to be surveyed. The surveys are done by email instead of the traditional means of phone calls.

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