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What is core to American Catholics in 2011

Michele Dillon | Oct. 24, 2011
Catholics in America

Hmong Catholics Mary Suilian and Dolly Thang from Battle Creek, Mich., pray the rosary during a pilgrimage of Asian Catholics at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington in May 2010. (CNS/Nancy Wiechec)

The term ?cafeteria Catholic? has been used for many years to refer to the fact that Catholics tend to selectively prioritize certain aspects of Catholic theology and tradition while seeing other strands as comparatively less important to the practice of Catholicism. The phrase is typically used dismissively and has prompted some church leaders and observers to suggest that the church might be better off if Catholics who do not subscribe to the full orthodoxy of Catholicism were pruned from its ranks. The sociological reality, however, is more complicated. Catholic orthodoxy is itself heavily encrusted with doctrinal shifts, institutional changes and theological nuance, characteristics befitting Catholicism?s long history and constituting a pluralistic tradition that allows for more thoughtful individual autonomy than some might assume. Additionally, the doctrinal selectivity of contemporary Catholics is much more constrained by, and attuned to, the Catholic tradition than the cafeteria metaphor suggests.

Our research shows that the church?s foundational theological beliefs and the sacraments are at the heart of what American Catholics see as core to their Catholic identity (Figure 2). As indicated by our 2011 survey, almost three-quarters (73 percent) say that ?belief in Jesus? resurrection from the dead? is very important to them personally, and close to two-thirds say that the church?s teachings about Mary as the mother of God (64 percent), and the sacraments such as the Eucharist (63 percent) are also very important. Additionally, almost half (46 percent) say that having a regular daily prayer life is very important, and more than a third (36 percent) see devotional activities such as participation in eucharistic adoration or praying the rosary as very important to them as Catholics. It is noteworthy that helping the poor is almost as core to Catholics? identity as their belief in Jesus? resurrection, with 67 percent rating this dimension of Catholicism as very important.

By contrast with the emphasis Catholics give to belief in the resurrection, Mary, the sacraments, and helping the poor, they have less regard for the Vatican?s teaching authority. Fewer than one in three (30 percent) says that the Vatican?s teaching authority is very important to them, 46 percent say it is somewhat important, and 20

percent say that it is not important at all. Catholics also tend to de-emphasize the importance of the church?s social and moral teachings to their personal identity as Catholics. Although the Vatican and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops have been highly involved over several decades in articulating the church?s opposition to abortion, fewer than half of American Catholics, 40 percent, say that the church?s teachings opposing abortion are very important to them personally. And even fewer say that the church?s opposition to same-sex marriage (35 percent) and the death penalty (29 percent) are very important. Similarly, Catholics also see the current structure of the church, despite its centuries-old tradition, as relatively unimportant to their identity as Catholics. Most strikingly, only one in five Catholics (21 percent) says that a celibate, male clergy is very important to them as Catholics, and almost half (46 percent) say that it is not important at all. By the same token, close to two-thirds (62 percent) indicate support for women in the role of priests in the church, and 75 percent express support for women as deacons.

What is a ?good Catholic??

We get further insight into what Catholics see as core to Catholicism when we look at their opinions of what is entailed in being a ?good Catholic.? In keeping with the strong trend established by past surveys, the vast majority of Catholics take a highly autonomous view of what it means to be a good Catholic. Large majorities say that a person can be a good Catholic without going to church every Sunday (78 percent), without obeying the church hierarchy?s teaching on birth control (78 percent), without their marriage being approved by the church (72 percent), and without obeying the church hierarchy?s teaching on divorce and remarriage (69 percent). Though still well over a majority, fewer Catholics agree that one can be a good Catholic without obeying church teaching on abortion (60 percent). These percentages are consistent with, though slightly higher than, the figures from the 2005 survey.

What are the obligations of ?good Catholics? to the poor and to the parish? It is noteworthy that that there is a significant increase in the percentage of Catholics who say that one can be a good Catholic without donating time or money to help the poor. In 2005, 44 percent of Catholics said that a person could be a good Catholic without donating time or money to help the poor, but now in 2011, this figure has increased to a substantial 60 percent. This shift may be evidence of a loosening of Catholics? felt obligations to the poor. But it may also reflect other factors. It may, for example, reflect the fact that Catholics, like many Americans, have experienced economic losses since the recession hit in 2008 and have responded to the recession, in part, by giving less priority to the poor as they themselves struggle to make ends meet and/or help relatives and neighbors negatively impacted by the economic downturn. The change may also be due to what researchers call a mode effect: The more impersonal, Internet mode of data gathering used in our 2011 survey compared to the personal telephone interview used in prior surveys, tends to decrease the impact of social desirability on interviewees? responses and thus may account for respondents? greater tendency to disavow an obligation to the poor.

We see a parallel decline in Catholics? felt obligations to the parish. Whereas 58 percent of Catholics in our 2005 survey said that a person could be a good Catholic without donating time or money to help the parish, 74 percent expressed this view in 2011. This increase may also be driven by the recession and/or survey mode effects, and abetted by lingering concerns among some Catholics that money donated to the parish may be used to help defray diocesan legal costs associated with the sex abuse crisis.

In keeping with the centrality of foundational theological beliefs to Catholics? identity, comparatively fewer respondents endorse an autonomous view of core theological tenets. The numbers doing so, however, have increased slightly since the 2005 survey. For example, 40 percent say that one can be a good Catholic without believing that in Mass, the bread and wine really become the body and blood of Christ, compared to 36 percent who said so in 2005; and 31 percent in 2011, compared to 23 percent in 2005, say that a person can be a good Catholic without believing that Jesus physically rose from the dead.

Meaning in Catholicism

Although American Catholics are highly autonomous about what is entailed in being Catholic and are especially likely to privilege their own moral judgment rather than Vatican teaching, this does not mean that they are indifferent to either the church or to Catholicism. Quite the contrary. More than three-quarters (77 percent) of American Catholics say that the Catholic church is important in their lives, with more than a third of these (37 percent) seeing it as among the most important parts of their lives, and an additional 40 percent regarding it as quite important, similar to other important aspects of their lives. Far fewer, one fifth, see the church as ?not terribly important? to them, and only 4 percent as not at all important. Catholics do leave the church at a rate, according to the Pew Forum, that is higher than among Protestants, who tend instead to move across denominations. However, many nonetheless maintain a tenacious hold on their Catholic identity: Fifty-six percent say they would never leave the Catholic church, and an additional 32 percent indicate that it is unlikely they would leave. The personal hold of Catholicism is further evident among our respondents, three-quarters (75 percent) of whom say that ?being a Catholic is a very important part of who I am,? more than two-thirds (68 percent) of whom ?cannot imagine being anything but Catholic,? and three in four (75 percent) of whom say that it is important to them that the younger generations of their family grow up as Catholics.

One reason why Catholics continue to remain loyal to Catholicism while skeptical of some of its teachings and practices is that there are many aspects of Catholicism that they find meaningful. In response to a new question we introduced in the 2011 survey, very large majorities indicate that the Mass (84 percent) and the grace of the other sacraments (80 percent) are meaningful to them, and similarly high proportions find meaning in various aspects of the church?s tradition, such as the fact that the church is universal (85 percent), and that it is part of an unbroken tradition dating back to the apostles (80 percent). Fewer, though still close to three-quarters (71 percent), find meaning in the papacy. Clearly, Catholics can disagree with the pope and dissent from Vatican teaching on various issues and, at the same time, value the historical and symbolic significance of the papacy. Similarly, they can also disagree with or make moral judgments that contravene church teaching and yet also respect the church?s moral stance. Thus, for example, although six in 10 Catholics, as noted earlier, think that a person can be a good Catholic without helping the poor and without agreeing with church teaching on abortion, very large majorities nonetheless also say that it is meaningful for them that the church shows active concern for the poor (88 percent), and that it is willing to stand up for the right to life of the unborn (72 percent).

It is further noteworthy that close to nine in 10 Catholics (86 percent) find it meaningful that Catholics can disagree with aspects of church teaching and still remain loyal to the church. Dissent and loyalty, therefore,

unify Catholics and, along with the centrality of the sacraments and core theological beliefs and traditions (e.g., apostolic tradition, the papacy), likely bolster their sense of (universal) community; 80 percent of Catholics say that they find meaning in the shared community they sense with other Catholics. In sum, pointing to the multidimensional layering of the diverse aspects of Catholicism that maintain Catholics? commitment to the church, large majorities identify several aspects of Catholicism as personally meaningful to them, and what is ?very meaningful? for at least a half of all Catholics is the Mass (53 percent), the church?s concern for the poor (52 percent), the fact that the church is universal (50 percent), and that Catholics can selectively disagree with, but remain loyal to, the church (50 percent).

Hispanics and non-Hispanics

As other essays in this *NCR* edition highlight, Hispanics are changing the face of American Catholicism. Demographically, they are younger, less educated, and concentrated in the West and South. In terms of Catholic identity, they tend to be more devout, more theologically conservative, and more deferential toward the institutional church and the Catholic tradition. Thus, far higher percentages of Hispanic than non-Hispanic Catholics endorse the respective aspects of Catholicism as being very important to them, and fewer Hispanic than other Catholics say that one can be a good Catholic without fulfilling various obligations or obeying church teaching on various socio-moral issues. Yet there is remarkable convergence between Hispanic and non-Hispanic Catholics regarding their prioritization of what is very important to them as Catholics.

For both groups, belief in the Resurrection, Mary, the sacraments, and helping the poor are the most frequently affirmed dimensions, though more Hispanics identify Mary than the sacraments, while similar numbers of non-Hispanics affirm both (see Figure 3).

At the opposite end of the spectrum, the fewest numbers within both groups see a celibate, male clergy as important. It is interesting, moreover, that Hispanic Catholics, similar to other Catholics, de-emphasize the Vatican?s teaching authority. In fact, for Hispanics, the Vatican?s teaching authority is the second least important aspect of Catholicism (after celibacy). Similarly, among the various aspects of Catholicism that are meaningful to Catholics, for Hispanic and non-Hispanic Catholics alike, the papacy is endorsed the least, whereas the Mass and the church?s active concern for the poor are for both groups most frequently endorsed as ?very meaningful.? In view of the percentage differences (as opposed to ranking differences) between Hispanic and non-Hispanic Catholics regarding a broad range of items, it is particularly noteworthy that relatively similar proportions of both Hispanic (46 percent) and non-Hispanic (51 percent) Catholics endorse as very meaningful the fact that Catholics can disagree with aspects of church teaching and still remain loyal to the church. This finding suggests that the growing presence of Hispanic Catholics is unlikely to alter American Catholicism?s rich blend of theological substance, doctrinal autonomy and institutional loyalty.

Gender variation

Highlighting the responses among non-Hispanic Catholics regarding what they consider important and meaningful in Catholicism, gender emerges as a significant source of variation. I focus on non-Hispanic Catholics because they are more diverse demographically than the Hispanics in our sample, who comprise a

relatively homogeneous group of mostly younger and less-educated respondents. Among non-Hispanic Catholics, women are more likely than men to identify the sacraments such as the Eucharist (67 percent for women versus 56 percent for men), belief in Jesus? resurrection (74 percent for women versus 66 percent for men), church teachings about Mary (65 percent versus 56 percent), helping the poor (65 percent versus 60 percent), and having a regular prayer life (48 percent versus 44 percent) as ?very important.? And they are less likely than men to say that the church?s opposition to same-sex marriage (28 percent for women versus 37 percent for men) and the Vatican?s teaching authority (24 percent versus 29 percent) are ?very important? to them.

There is a strong consensus between women and men regarding what is entailed in being a ?good Catholic.? The only exception is that fewer women (36 percent) than men (48 percent) say that one can be a good Catholic without believing that in the Mass, the bread and wine really becomes the body and blood of Jesus. In keeping with women?s greater attachment to the church?s sacraments, they are also more likely than men to go to church monthly or more frequently (53 percent versus 46 percent). Further, for women, the church?s emphasis on the sacraments (49 percent versus 38 percent for men), and the Mass (53 percent versus 44 percent) are more likely to be very meaningful aspects of Catholicism than they are for men (see Figure 4). Given that some church prohibitions (e.g., against women?s ordination, contraception) are more applicable in practice to women than men, it is noteworthy that a majority of women, 57 percent, say that the fact that Catholics can disagree with aspects of church teaching and still stay loyal to the church is very meaningful to them. In fact, more Catholic women endorse this dimension of Catholicism than any other aspect. Fewer men, though still close to a majority (46 percent), agree that this aspect of Catholicism is very meaningful to them. The only other source of gender variation is that women are more likely than men to say that the church?s concern for the poor (51 percent for women versus 42 percent for men) is very meaningful to them.

Summary

Consistent with previous surveys, American Catholics are more likely to stress the personal importance to them of the church?s theological beliefs (e.g., the Resurrection) and helping the poor, while seeing the Vatican?s teaching authority and its teachings on contraception, same-sex marriage and abortion as less important. They continue to take a highly autonomous view of Catholic obligations, and give individuals much leeway in determining what is entailed in being a good Catholic. Catholics? autonomy from the church hierarchy, however, is coupled with a strong attachment to the church and Catholicism. There are many aspects of Catholicism that are meaningful to Catholics, and it is especially noteworthy that many Catholics value what the church stands for (e.g., the right to life of the unborn) even if they do not fully agree with what the church teaches on a given issue. Most tellingly, perhaps, half of all Catholics, and more than half of Catholic women, say that it is very meaningful to them that Catholics can selectively disagree with, but remain loyal to, the church. Finally, although Hispanic and non-Hispanic Catholics differ in the extent to which they embrace different aspects of Catholicism, they both prioritize the same dimensions of their Catholic identity.

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FIGURE 2

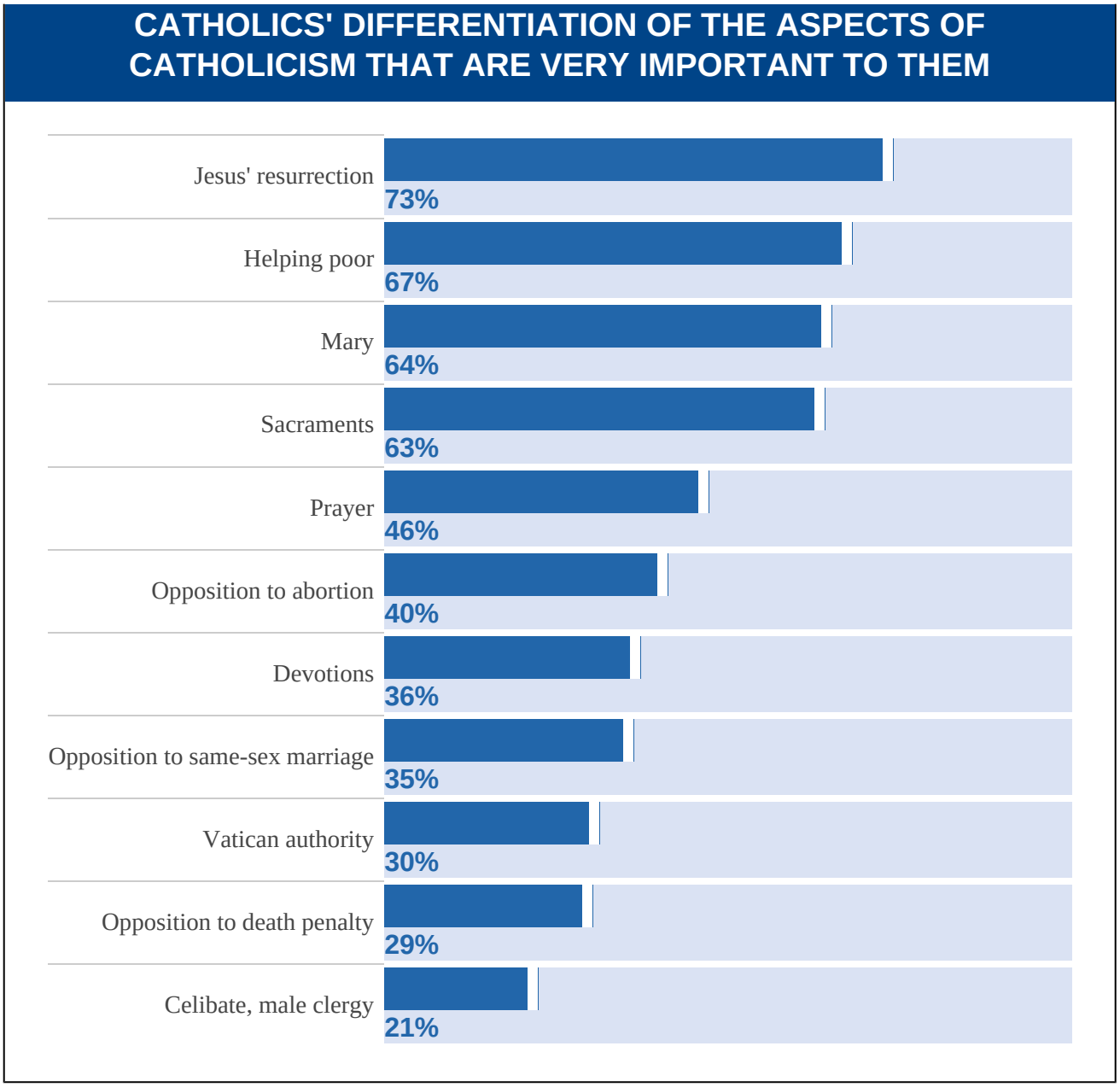


FIGURE 3

CONVERGENCE BETWEEN HISPANIC

AND NON-HISPANIC CATHOLICS

In their ranking of what is very important to them as Catholics

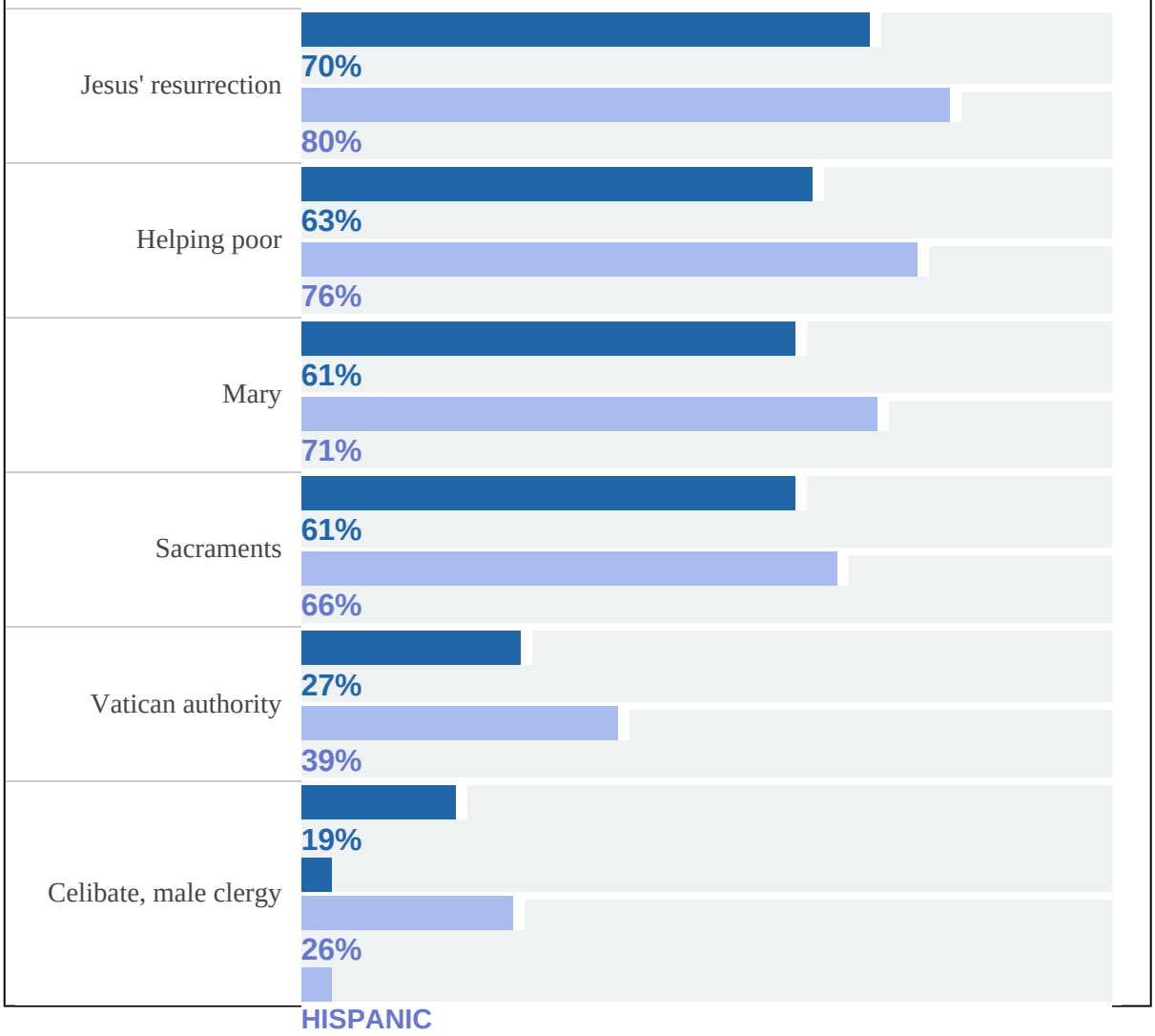
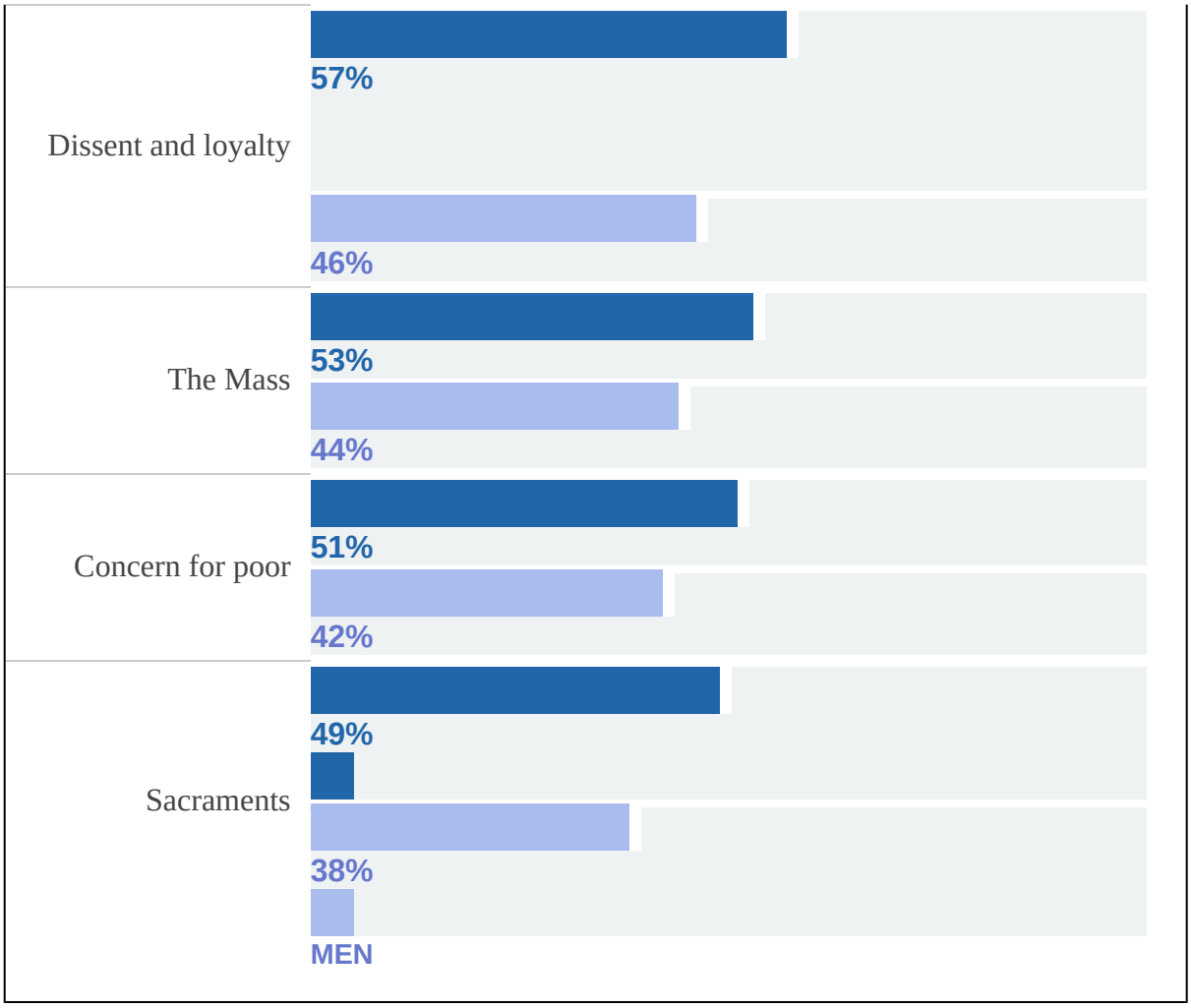


FIGURE 4

ASPECTS OF CATHOLICISM CONSIDERED VERY MEANINGFUL, BY GENDER



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