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Right and wrong: Who has final say?

The Research Team | Oct. 24, 2011
Catholics in America

Pope Benedict XVI smiles as he leaves a prayer service with pontifical university students in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Nov. 4. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

Authority

One key to understanding the way that Catholics approach moral issues and questions of right and wrong is to consider the sources to which they look for moral authority. Are decisions about right and wrong ultimately the province of church leaders like the pope and bishops? Or does moral authority reside with individuals deciding these things for themselves -- perhaps after taking church teachings into account? Or do both church leaders and individuals, working together, constitute the proper locus of moral authority?
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The survey shows that when it comes to issues like divorce and remarriage, abortion, non-marital sex, homosexuality, and contraception, many Catholics are willing to take the teachings of church leaders under consideration, but relatively few Catholics look to the pope and bishops as the sole arbiters of right and wrong on these matters. On the question of divorce and remarriage, for instance, about half of Catholics rely at least somewhat on the guidance of church leaders to decide what is right and what is wrong. But only one in five Catholics says that church leaders should have the final say about right and wrong in this area, compared with 47 percent who say judgments about the morality of divorce and remarriage are best left to individuals. The findings are even starker on the other topics covered by the survey. When it comes to questions of abortion, non-marital sex, and homosexuality, many Catholics say final moral authority resides solely with church leaders or with a combination of church leadership and individual judgment, but upwards of half of those surveyed say individuals themselves are best equipped to make moral decisions on these matters. When it comes to contraception, fully two-thirds of Catholics say individuals themselves should have final say about right and wrong, more than six times the number who agree that church leaders should have final say about right and wrong on this issue.

The current findings about the locus of moral authority are broadly consistent with the last two iterations of the survey (in 1999 and 2005), with perhaps a slight tilt toward favoring more authority for individuals and less for church leaders (Table 17). The number of Catholics who currently look exclusively to church leaders for

authority on matters of divorce and remarriage and of contraception is roughly the same today as 25 years ago. On other issues, however, the share of Catholics who look solely to church leaders for guidance on matters of right and wrong has declined.

Perhaps not surprisingly, those Catholics who attend Mass most regularly are also the most likely to put their trust in church leadership on questions about right and wrong. Even among those who report attending Mass at least once a week, however, fewer than half say they look solely to church leadership for guidance on these issues. And when it comes to the morality of contraception, a plurality of regular Mass attenders (44 percent) say that they rely on their own individual judgment in deciding what is right and wrong.

The data show that it is not possible to make broad generalizations about the views of moral authority across different generations of Catholics. Pre-Vatican II Catholics are more inclined than younger generations to look exclusively to church authorities for guidance on questions about abortion. However, half of the oldest generation of Catholics say individuals themselves are the proper locus of moral authority regarding abortion. And on questions of divorce and remarriage, pre-Vatican II Catholics are no more likely than other generations to rely exclusively on church authorities for guidance. Millennial Catholics closely resemble their immediate predecessors on most of the questions about moral authority; the youngest generation of Catholics does not stand out as either more individualistic on the one hand or more deferential to church leaders on the other.

Men and women look to similar sources for moral authority on questions of divorce and remarriage, abortion and non-marital sex. Roughly half of both sexes say that individuals themselves are the best arbiters of right and wrong on these issues, with approximately three in 10 saying that both church leaders and individuals should work together to decide these matters, and roughly two in 10 or fewer saying that authority on these matters ultimately rests with church leaders alone. When it comes to the morality of homosexuality and contraception, by contrast, women are slightly more likely than men to say that individuals themselves should have the final say about what is right and what is wrong. Upward of six in 10 women (61 percent) say that individuals know best about the morality of homosexuality, compared with 53 percent of men. And fully seven in 10 women say individuals themselves are the best judges of the morality of contraception, compared with 63 percent of men.

Unmarried Catholics are much more likely than their married counterparts to say that individuals should have final say as to whether non-marital sex is right or wrong. Six in 10 unmarried Catholics (including two-thirds of those who are living with a partner) say that individuals are the proper source of moral authority when it comes to the question of non-marital sex, as compared with fewer than half of married Catholics (47 percent) who say the same. Among both groups, fewer than one in five say that church leaders have sole authority as to whether non-marital sex is right or wrong. Differences between married and unmarried Catholics are smaller on the other issues, including the morality of divorce and remarriage. Even the subset of unmarried Catholics who are themselves divorced or separated is no more likely than married Catholics to say that individuals are the proper arbiters of right and wrong in this area.

Catholics who reside in the Northeast are consistently more likely than those from other regions of the country to rely on their own individual judgments -- rather than those of church leaders -- on questions of right and wrong. In fact, on all five issues covered by the survey, upward of half of northeastern Catholics surveyed said that individuals themselves are the best arbiters of right and wrong.

Summary

On most of the issues we asked about, majorities of Catholics surveyed say that the locus of moral authority resides with individuals, who should decide for themselves after taking church teachings into account. One in five Catholics or fewer says that church leaders such as the pope and bishops are the proper arbiters of right and wrong in these areas. Between one-fifth and one-third of Catholics say that moral authority is best exercised by individuals and church leaders working together.

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TRENDS IN SOURCES

OF MORAL AUTHORITY

WHO SHOULD HAVE FINAL SAY ABOUT WHAT IS RIGHT OR WRONG? CHURCH LEADERS, INDIVIDUALS OR BOTH?

	1987	1993	1999	2005	2011
CHURCH LEADERS					
Divorce and remarriage	23%	23%	19%	22%	20%
Abortion	29	21	20	25	19
Sex outside of marriage	34	23	23	22	16
Homosexuality	32	26	20	24	16
Contraception	12	14	10	13	10
INDIVIDUALS					
Divorce and remarriage	31%	38%	45%	42%	47%
Abortion	45	44	47	44	52
Sex outside of marriage	42	44	47	47	53
Homosexuality	39	39	49	46	57
Contraception	62	57	62	61	66
BOTH					
Divorce and remarriage	43%	37%	32%	35%	32%
Abortion	22	33	29	30	28
Sex outside of marriage	21	30	26	30	30
Homosexuality	12	30	25	28	26
Contraception	23	26	23	27	22

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