

New survey offers portrait of U.S. Catholics

William D'Antonio | Oct. 24, 2011
Catholics in America



People fill the pews and side aisles during inauguration ceremonies for the Basilica of St. Patrick's Old Cathedral in New York Dec. 5, 2010. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Our research team has now carried out the fifth survey of American Catholics. The first survey, done just after Easter in 1987 and in anticipation of Pope John Paul II's second visit to the United States, was designed with the hope that our bishops and the pope would find value in a demographic profile of American Catholics as well as a sketch of their beliefs, practices and attitudes.

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The fifth survey, also completed in the weeks after Easter, and now six years into the reign of Pope Benedict XVI, provides a portrait showing both persistence and change in the beliefs, practices and attitudes of Catholics as they head into the second decade of the 21st century.

This fifth survey took place in a time of continuing challenges facing the institutional church, with the sex abuse scandals still the subject of headlines nationally and worldwide; abortion and gender politics causing strains on several levels; the priest shortage, celibacy and the role of women prompting rethinking of the structure of the priesthood; and a prolonged economic recession putting new pressures onto the church's teachings on "a preferential option for the poor," immigration and the rights of workers to organize. The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life reported in 2009 that one in 10 Americans are former Catholics and that about one in three of those raised Catholic have left the church. At the same time, a 2008 Pew Forum report indicated a net loss of 7.5 percent in the number of Americans who were born Catholic but who are no longer Catholic (compared to a net loss of 3.7 percent for Baptists, the largest Protestant denominational family). As is true across all denominations, the departures appear to be especially heavy among the younger generations. Nonetheless, Catholics' share of the American population has remained stable (at 24 percent), largely as a result of Hispanic immigrants. In the midst of this fluidity, no one knows the impact that the growing number of Hispanic Catholics will have on present trends.

We designed the fifth survey to continue tracking trends among generations, across gender lines and among differing levels of commitment and Catholic identity. The continued growth in the Hispanic portion of the

Catholic population, and the importance of the youngest generation (the millennials, those born 1979-93), led us to enlarge the size of the survey sample to enable more detailed analysis controlling for ethnicity within and across generations. And we added new questions to probe the issues sketched out above.

Catholic identity, no longer a matter of simply knowing the Baltimore Catechism and having particular ethnic ties, has become part of the national dialogue between those with a more conservative vision and those who define the church more in terms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and its documents. Michele Dillon weaves an intriguing story showing how persistent are the core beliefs and practices held by American Catholics about their Catholic identity ([see story \[1\]](#)), and in another essay examines the relative stability of their commitment to the church ([see story \[2\]](#)). But she also reports a significant decline in the percentages of Catholics who affirm the obligation of Catholics to donate time and money to help the poor and to help the parish.

In 2005 we wondered what impact the sex abuse scandal might have on the way the laity would respond to our survey questions; the findings showed then that the scandal had little measurable impact. However, six years of new headlines, nationally in Philadelphia and internationally in Ireland, Germany and Austria, have led to a more in-depth examination of the scandal and the laity's assessment of its impact on the credibility of church leaders ([see story \[3\]](#)).

Just as it is important to recognize the relevance of the statement that "All politics is local," so also is it the case that "Catholic life is local" -- i.e., parish-centered. Mary Gautier shows the demographic trends that have affected parish life and discusses the strengths and the weaknesses in current parish structures ([see story \[4\]](#)). She also describes the implications of changes over time in the attitudes and behaviors of Catholics that are related to parish life.

In 1884 the Catholic bishops formally established the Catholic school system, with the goal of a school in every parish. While that goal was not accomplished, and in fact less than half of parishes ever had a school, the school as the heart of parish life reached its heights in the 1950s and '60s. Gautier explores the question "Catholic education today: Does it make a difference?" at a time when costs are rising, teaching sisters have largely disappeared and schools are shutting down ([see story \[5\]](#)).

Several research centers have major grants studying the religious/spiritual lives of emerging adults. These emerging adults are the millennial Catholics of our survey. Our research team examines the lives of Catholic millennials in several essays. One essay by the research team gives special attention to areas of Catholic life in which Hispanic and non-Hispanic millennials hold similar and different beliefs, practices and attitudes about being Catholic ([see story \[6\]](#)).

I take a long look at the generations, how they have changed over time, and the implications as those we have called the pre-Vatican II Catholics make their final appearance in this report ([see story \[7\]](#)).

I also examine the way political party identification of Catholics has changed over time ([see story \[8\]](#)) and what such changes might imply for the church's teachings on a consistent ethic of life and such component issues as abortion, health care for the poor, the death penalty and immigration reform. Gender, Mass attendance and ethnicity are all important factors in our attempts to understand the political leanings of American Catholics.



Mass attendance, long the most commonly used measure of the

religiousness of Catholics, will be examined within several of the papers noted above. In the process, some common conventional wisdom about church attendance and why Catholics do or do not attend more frequently will be addressed.

One of the most important findings about American Catholics has to do with their beliefs and attitudes about church authority. The research team traces the patterns of persistence and change that have characterized American Catholics' responses over these five surveys ([see story](#) [9]).

Surveys in recent years have noted that more and more Americans talk about being spiritual as well as religious, or being spiritual but not religious. We used several questions from the Pew Forum and from the General Social Survey, a national survey sponsored by the National Science Foundation, to get a better idea about the degree to which American Catholics have adopted this way of thinking, and what factors might provide some insight into this new thinking. Dillon has been tracking this phenomenon and provides an insightful essay, with some important differences found between Hispanic and other Catholics ([see story](#) [10]).

History of the surveys

In 1987, when I accepted the invitation of Tom Fox, then (and now again) editor of *NCR*, and then *NCR* publisher Bill McSweeney to carry out a national survey of American Catholics, I did so with the understanding that I would form a team of researchers to work with me. I had no idea that this would become a longitudinal project that would track both stability and change in beliefs, practices and attitudes among American Catholics over a 25-year period. My colleague Dean Hoge, now deceased, saw the possibilities from the beginning, and his encouragement, support, and arrangement of an adjunct appointment for me at The Catholic University of America in Washington after my retirement from the American Sociological Association made this research project possible.

Jim Davidson of Purdue University in West Lafayette, Ind., was a core part of our team through the first four surveys, *NCR* features, and books. Early on, he called special attention to generational differences among Catholics, which became an important contribution to the study of American Catholics. Health concerns and new interests led Jim to retire from the team, but his influence on our research lives on. So also with Ruth Wallace, now professor emerita of The George Washington University in Washington, who was a team member for the first two surveys before turning her full attention to her studies of priestless parishes run by lay women and men. Katherine Meyer of Ohio State University in Columbus graciously agreed to be part of the team for the third survey, and her presence during a time of transition was greatly appreciated. I would also like to acknowledge Greg Smith, senior researcher at the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life and author of *Politics in the Parish: The Political Influence of Catholic Priests*, who consulted on the design of the questionnaire and the analysis of the data in this latest survey.

Gautier of Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) has become a core member, adding depth to our resources through her years of research and writing for the Washington-based CARA on parish life and Catholic education. She is a coauthor of *Catholicism USA: A Portrait of the Catholic Church in the United States*

The team's fifth survey includes Dillon, chair of the department of sociology at the University of New Hampshire in Durham and author of the widely acclaimed *Catholic Identity: Balancing Reason, Faith, and Power*.

This year's survey has several sponsors: A grant provided by an anonymous donor was matched by the following: the Rotondaro Family Foundation, the Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies, the *National Catholic Reporter*, the Rudolf Family Foundation, the Donegal Foundation and the Luger Family Foundation. *NCR* primarily sponsored the 1987 and 1993 surveys, with additional funds for the first survey provided by Fr. Andrew Greeley. The Louisville Institute funded the 1999 survey, and the institute and an anonymous donor cosponsored the 2005 survey, again with financial support from *NCR*. The teams of researchers, consultants and coauthors are grateful to the donors who have made these surveys possible. The research teams are solely responsible for the surveys, the reports published in *NCR* and the four volumes published.

The Gallup Organization carried out the first four surveys. The cost of a Gallup survey more than doubled between 1987 and 2005. In preparing for this fifth survey, we wanted to ensure a Hispanic sample large enough to make meaningful comparisons between Hispanic and non-Hispanic Catholics, for which we needed a sample size of 1,300 to 1,400. Raising the sample to this size put the cost of a Gallup survey outside our range. So we sought an alternative that would provide a probability sample suited to our needs, at a cost we could afford. After much deliberation and having assured ourselves that we had found a company that could satisfy our needs, we accepted the proposal offered by Knowledge Networks of Chicago. Knowledge Networks has built an in-house probability online panel, whose samples reflect the national population as well as the more traditional survey does.

We especially appreciated the help and guidance provided by Bill McCready, senior consultant for Knowledge Networks, through all stages of preparation, decisions on sample size, and meeting deadlines. For a fuller statement of Knowledge Networks' methodology, ([see story](#) [11]).

Then and now

In 1987, when we conducted our first survey of American Catholics, our profile of American Catholics showed 86 percent white (mostly of European origins), 10 percent Hispanic (mostly from Mexico), 5 percent black, Asian, Native American and other. We acknowledged that there was an undercount of Hispanics, due to reasons never fully understood or verified. But we worked with the data we had.

[Table 1](#) shows how much Catholic demographics have changed since 1987. Hispanic Catholics now constitute one-third of all Catholics, with their numbers and proportion expected to continue to grow into the foreseeable future. While the majority of these Hispanics still have Mexican ancestry, Central and South America have added ethnic and cultural distinctions to the U.S. mix. Black Catholics, Asians, Native Americans and others currently account for about 5 percent of the total.

The age structure reflects national population trends, with a growing bulge in the older ages, and shrinking numbers in the younger age brackets. With completed fertility rates now hovering around two children per woman, Hispanic family rates declining in second and third generations, and immigration slowing, there is little in the findings to suggest a new baby boom. We will take a closer look at aging when we examine the age cohorts (generations) we have used in analyzing these surveys.

In 1987, 62 percent of Catholics were married; in 2011 just over half (54 percent) are married, while an additional 10 percent are "living with partner."

The importance of education in this rapidly changing world is regularly emphasized in the media by leaders across the societal spectrum. Twenty-five years ago, 21 percent of Catholics had less than a high school education; now that figure is down to 14 percent. (Data from the U.S Census [2003-2007] reported that 88 percent of native-born Americans had graduated from high school.) At the other end of the educational spectrum, only 12 percent of U.S. Catholics in 1987 had earned a college degree with an additional 8 percent having graduate or professional degrees. Today's figures are 18 percent and 9 percent respectively. (See the essays comparing Hispanic and non-Hispanic Catholics for details about differences in education and income.)

More than half (53 percent) now have college or advanced degrees, or at least some post-secondary education. Twenty-seven percent have college and graduate degrees. Gautier examines and compares the public and Catholic school data in her essay ([see story](#) [5]).

One of the most dramatic changes in the Catholic profile is found in the family income category. In 1987, a third of the Catholic families in our sample had family incomes under \$20,000, and another third were between \$20,000 and \$40,000. Only one in five had incomes of \$40,000 or more. Eighteen percent did not answer or refused to answer this question. In 2011 there were no refusals; 60 percent of Catholics reported family incomes of \$40,000 or more, with 22 percent of that number reporting incomes of \$100,000 or more. Catholics have indeed become comfortable members of the American mainstream in terms of the key variables of education, occupation and income. For example, for 2009, the most recent date for which national figures were available, the median family (also listed as household) income was \$50,221. All projections are that the national figure for 2010 and 2011 will not be higher, and will probably be at least \$1,000 lower. Our 2011 findings show that 51 percent of Catholic families reported incomes of \$50,000 or higher, roughly the same median level as reported by the U.S. population. Nevertheless, Catholics now share both the benefits of higher education and the costs of the flat earning power during the past decade.

Once again, with special thanks to the *National Catholic Reporter* for all the space and time they have provided us, we the authors and coauthors are fully responsible for this report of the fifth survey of American Catholics.

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TABLE 1

<h2 style="text-align: center;">PROFILE OF AMERICAN CATHOLICS</h2> <h3 style="text-align: center;">CHANGES OVER 25 YEARS (PERCENT)</h3>		
	1987	2011
RACE		
White (non-Hispanic)	86%	63%
Hispanic	10%	32%
Black, Asian, and other non-Hispanic	5%	5%
MARITAL STATUS		
Married	62%	54%
Never married	22%	20%
Divorced, widowed, separated	15%	15%
Living with partner	--	10%

AGE		
55 or older	27%	34%
45-54	12%	19%
35-44	18%	21%
25-34	26%	16%
18-24	17%	10%
GENDER		
Female	52%	50%
Male	48%	50%
EDUCATION		
Some high school and less	21%	14%
High school graduate	40%	32%
Some college	20%	19%
Associate degree	--	7%
College graduate	12%	18%
Graduate and professional degrees	8%	9%
CATHOLIC EDUCATION		
Grade school	52%	37%
High school	25%	19%
Catholic college/university	8%	8%
INCOME		
Under \$10,000	12%	7%
\$10,000-\$19,999	20%	11%
\$20,000-\$29,999	19%	12%
\$30,000-\$39,999	13%	10%
\$40,000 or more	19%	60%*
No answer, refused	18%	--

*Among this 60%, 22% reported incomes of \$100,000 or more.

[Editor's Note: An earlier version of this article misstated the number of companies that have built in-house probability online panels. Knowledge Networks is the only company that has such a panel; their samples reflect the national population as well as the more traditional survey does.]

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