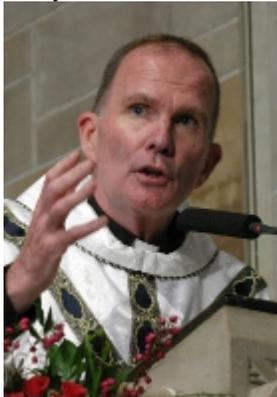


Unusual study asks former Catholics why they left church

Jerry Filteau | Mar. 23, 2012



Trenton, N.J., Bishop David M. O'Connell is seen in a 2010 file photo. (CNS photo/Michael Alexander, *Georgia Bulletin*)

WASHINGTON -- In an unusual study whose main results were released at a Catholic University of America conference in Washington Thursday, Villanova University in Philadelphia asked former Catholics in the Trenton, N.J., diocese why they left the church.

While the results themselves were not surprising, the researchers said, the study suggests new ways the church can approach Catholics who are dissatisfied with what the church teaches or how it acts -- including those so dissatisfied that they have decided to leave.

One of their key recommendations was for pastors, bishops and other church officials to respond consistently to questioning or angry Catholics with constructive dialogue rather than a simple reiteration of church rules or policies.

Jesuit Fr. William J. Byron, a professor of business at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia -- who collaborated in the study with Charles Zech, founder and director of the Center for the Study of Church Management of Villanova's School of Business -- several times cited a response of one disaffiliated Catholic who complained, "Ask a question of any priest and you get a rule; you don't get a 'Let's sit down and talk about it' response."

Byron and Zech told conference participants at The Catholic University of America that many of the responses from lapsed or disaffiliated Catholics in the Trenton diocese matched what researchers have known from other surveys: They object to what they see as the church's unwelcoming attitude toward gays and lesbians or toward the divorced and remarried, they find homilies uninspiring, the parish unwelcoming, the pastor arrogant or parish staff uncaring, or they have suffered terrible personal experiences with a priest or other church official, such as rejection for being divorced.



Some of the former Catholics complained of priests being too liberal, while others cited "the extreme conservative haranguing" they heard in homilies "reflecting the intra-Catholic political divisions that reflect similar divisions in the broader U.S. society.

Surprisingly, Byron said, although all those who responded to the survey left the church for various reasons of dissatisfaction, "only half the respondents were pointedly negative" in their assessment of their most recent pastor. There were "many enthusiastic, positive responses" to most recent pastors, he reported.

Byron and Zech noted that the responses "which Villanova invited by a range of advertising in local Catholic and secular media" made no pretense of representing a sociological random sample survey. They were what Byron called a "convenience survey," representing only the usable responses of the 298 ex-Catholics in the Trenton diocese who learned about the survey through local media advertisements and felt strongly enough about the question to respond by mail or online.

Before the three-hour conference in Washington, in an email response to *NCR's* questions, Trenton Bishop David M. O'Connell said he invited Byron and Zech to conduct the survey of ex-Catholics in his diocese after reading an article Byron wrote last year in *America*, a national Jesuit magazine, suggesting that "exit interviews" of former Catholics might help the church to understand better why Catholics leave the church and to respond more effectively to their concerns.

"When I became bishop of Trenton in December 2010, I learned that only 25 percent of our Catholic population were attending Mass on a regular basis," O'Connell wrote. "That percentage dwindled a bit by October of 2011 [the monthly average most U.S. dioceses use to count Mass attendance and to use as a norm for gauging local trends in Mass attendance]. This concerned me greatly."

O'Connell, who, like Byron, is a former Catholic University of America president (Byron 1982-92, O'Connell 1998-2010), said he asked Byron how to explore in the Trenton diocese Byron's idea of "exit interviews" to see why Catholics leave the church and what might be done about it.

Byron said in Washington that his *America* article was prompted by a conversation he had with a prominent Catholic business leader in New Jersey who suggested that if any company was losing customers, its first response should be exit interviews to see why customers were no longer shopping there.

In his email to *NCR* O'Connell highlighted one of the conclusions of the Zech-Byron study, that one of the most immediate challenges the U.S. church faces is to bring home to Catholics the central importance of the Eucharist in their lives.

"If only 25 percent or less of our Catholics are participating in the Eucharist regularly, I think we have a serious concern," he said. "The national average is about the same [as in the Trenton diocese]. We need to engage our

Catholics in such a way that we see the Eucharist as the "source and summit" of the Christian life, a necessary part of who we are in the church."

Zech and Byron recommended to O'Connell that he focus most immediately on "a fresh explanation of the nature of the Eucharist" and "a creative liturgical, pastoral, doctrinal and practical response" to complaints about the quality of weekend Catholic liturgies, especially about music and homilies.

During the discussion following the presentations, one of the questions raised among participants was the difficulty of understanding homilies of some foreign-born priests whose English is marked by a heavy foreign accent.

After the conference Mary Gautier, a longtime researcher at the Georgetown University-based Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, told *NCR* that currently about 6,000 of the 18,000 active priests in U.S. dioceses are foreign-born.

More germane to the Villanova study itself and the conference on it was the issue of how parish practices invited or failed to invite Catholics to be part of a community of believers who share a commitment as disciples of Christ.

William Dinges, a professor in Catholic University's department of theology and religious studies, said research in the 1940s and '50s indicated that U.S. Catholics and other U.S. religious adherents were largely identical in terms of their adherence to religious beliefs and practices of their forebears.

That began to change for Catholics after the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, he said, although he noted that it was not just the council, but a wide variety of other factors that influenced U.S. Catholic membership, participation and sense of affiliation with the church in the post-council years.

Byron said the Trenton findings urge Catholic leaders to be more sensitive to lay Catholic concerns.

At one point in the question-answer period of the discussion, as the growing shortage of priests was raised as a problem, Byron bluntly challenged official Catholic positions on priestly celibacy and ordination of women.

Calling the exclusion of married men and women from ordination "institutional barriers," he said such ordinations "may not happen," and many would argue that they "should not happen," he said, but to argue those things are "impossible" is to deny that "nothing is impossible with God."

"We may be stifling the Spirit" by "our resistance to respond" to the current priest shortage in the church's refusal to expand its rules for who can be ordained, he said.

Byron told *NCR* that he and Zech have already received a couple of requests to conduct similar studies in other dioceses, and he expected that additional requests would come in in the wake of an article due to appear in *America* in April on the results of the Trenton study.

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