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Study: Majority of Catholics say church should emphasize social justice, the poor

Tom Roberts | Oct. 22, 2012
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Catholics overwhelmingly say the church should emphasize social justice and the poor in its pronouncements on public policy, even if it means focusing less on abortion, according to a new study [1] conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute.

The data were contained in "The 2012 American Values Survey: How Catholics and the Religiously Unaffiliated Will Shape the 2012 Election and Beyond," which also found that the outcome of the presidential election "will be determined, in part, by which Catholics head to the polls and how many of America's fastest growing religious community, the religiously unaffiliated, are motivated to vote."

The survey of 3,000 Americans was done prior to the presidential debates and has a margin of error of plus or minus 2 percentage points. This year's version of the annual survey confirms an ongoing shift away from organized religion, especially among the young, creating what the report describes as "a religious marketplace" that is "marked by significant volatility." A recent survey [2] of the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life found that one in five adult Americans now claim no religious affiliation and that for the first time, the United States is no longer a majority Protestant country.

By a two-to-one margin, 60 percent to 31 percent, Catholics would prefer bishops to focus on social justice issues even if it means less emphasis on abortion. While that view is held strongly by Catholics who attend church only occasionally, "the most striking finding, and one that may surprise many leaders in the church, is that Catholics who attend church once a week or more also express a strong preference for an emphasis on social justice over abortion," the report states.

In that latter group, 51 percent said the church should focus more on social justice in its pronouncements, while 36 percent said it should focus on abortion and the right to life.

This issue is broken down further in the report's conclusion, an explanatory essay by E.J. Dionne and William A. Galston, both of the Brookings Institute. They write that liberal Catholics thought the church should focus on social justice by 70 percent to 25 percent and moderate Catholics held the same view by a 68 percent to 23 percent margin.

Even among conservative Catholics, Dionne and Glaston write, the view narrowly prevailed, with 46 percent saying social justice should be emphasized and 44 percent saying the focus should be on abortion.

If respondents to the survey identified themselves as Catholic or raised Catholic, they were asked this question:

> As I read a pair of statements, please tell me whether the FIRST statement or the SECOND statement comes closer to your own views -- even if neither is exactly right.

> In its statements about public policy, the Catholic Church should focus more on social justice and the obligation to help the poor, even it means focusing less on issues like abortion and the right to life.
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> OR
>
> In its statements about public policy, the Catholic Church should focus more on issues like abortion and the right to life, even if it means focusing less on social justice and the obligation to help the poor.

While significant consensus appears to exist regarding the church's emphasis in its public policy statements, less agreement exists among Catholics about the legality of abortion. A slight majority of Catholics, 53 percent, said abortion should be legal in all or most cases, with 44 percent saying it should be illegal in all or most cases. However, a large gap exists between those who attend church once a week or more: Sixty-three percent of those Catholics believe abortion should be illegal in all or most cases, while only 33 percent of those who attend monthly or yearly and 28 percent of those who attend seldom said abortion should be illegal in all or most cases.

Less of a gap exists on the question of the morality of abortion, with 71 percent of those who attend at least once a week say that having an abortion is morally wrong to 23 percent who don't. By a narrower 48 percent to 38 percent margin, those who attend monthly or only a few times a year also see abortion as morally wrong.

Catholic voters overall are evenly split between the major candidates, according to the study, with 49 percent preferring President Barack Obama and 47 percent Gov. Mitt Romney. Beneath those figures, however, is a "highly complex" Catholic vote. For instance, white Catholics preferred Romney to Obama 54 percent to 42 percent. Traditionalist Catholics, according to the study the 38 percent of Catholic voters who say the church should preserve traditional beliefs and practices, and "adaptive Catholics," the 57 percent who say the church should alter its beliefs and practices "in light of new circumstances" differed significantly in their politics with 61 percent of adaptive Catholics supporting Obama and 36 percent preferring Romney; more than 63 percent of traditionalist Catholic voters supported Romney with just 31 percent preferring Obama.

Among "social justice Catholics," Obama held a 60 percent to 37 percent lead; among "right to life" Catholics, Romney held a 67 percent to 27 percent lead.

The candidates' coalitions reflected the religious divides across the culture. Almost 80 percent of likely Romney voters identify as white Christian, including 37 percent who identify as white evangelical, 19 percent as white mainline Protestant and 19 percent white Catholic.

Obama, on the other hand, relies more on non-white Christians, including black Protestants (18 percent) and Hispanic Catholics (6 percent), non-Christian religious Americans (7 percent) and religiously unaffiliated (23 percent). Only 40 percent of likely Obama voters identify as white Christian. Fifteen percent of them identify as white mainline Protestant, 14 percent white Catholic and 9 percent white Evangelical Protestant.

By a large margin, the economy is the most important election issue, with 61 percent of likely voters placing it at the top of their list. Eighteen percent of voters mentioned health care as the most important. Social issues barely registered, with only 4 percent mentioning abortion, 2 percent citing immigration and only 1 percent listing same-sex marriage as the most important issue in considering their vote for president.

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[1] http://publicreligion.org/research/2012/10/american-values-survey-2012/
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