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Catholics and evangelicals split on gun control

by Maureen Fiedler

NCR Today

Yesterday, I did a fascinating interview for "Interfaith Voices" with Robert P. Jones, the founder and CEO of the Public Religion Research Institute, one of the leading public opinion polling firms dealing with issues of religion.

PRRI did its first poll on views of gun control in the summer of 2012 after the shooting in the movie theatre in Aurora, Colo. They did a second poll last week in the wake of the Newtown tragedy.

Most fascinating to Jones and to me was the large opinion split in both polls: Looking at the latest poll, two groups that say "pro-life" defines them well have vastly different views on gun control. Catholics are more favorable to stricter gun control laws (67 percent) than are white evangelicals (38 percent). Only 31 percent of Catholics live in a household that has a gun, compared to 57 percent of white evangelicals.

When I first read the data, I thought, "Of course, this is to be expected." Catholics are more likely to live in sociological areas that are wary of guns. They are urban, bicoastal and less likely to be part of a hunting culture. Evangelicals, on the other hand, more often live in rural areas and/or in the conservative South, both places where a hunting culture or "gun culture" is part of life.

Jones agrees with that sociological analysis, but he maintains that theology plays a role, too. Whopping percentages -- 87 percent of evangelicals and 75 percent of Catholics -- in both groups said the phrase "pro-life" describes them accurately. But the term "pro-life" has a much broader meaning among Catholics. Jones cited the Catholic bishops' use of that term in opposing the death penalty, in trying to cut the poverty rate, and most recently, in supporting gun control, a position that dates from 1975. Among evangelicals, "pro-life" is apparently equated with opposition to abortion and not much else.

And there is yet another irony in the polling. Catholic acceptance of the term "pro-life" is not necessarily

equated with abortion. In the new poll, 75 percent of Catholics say "pro-life" defines them well, but 61 percent of those same Catholics say "pro-choice" also defines them well. Although this poll did not deal with abortion, public opinion surveys have consistently shown that the majority of Catholics favor keeping abortion legal.

All this suggests that the term "pro-life" does indeed have a broad meaning among Catholics -- much more than its use as shorthand for opposition to abortion.

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