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# Can public opinion sway the moves of the new pope?

Pat Perriello | Mar. 12, 2013 NCR Today
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A recent New York *Times*/CBS News poll [1] has documented some very interesting opinions among American Catholics. I want to share a few of the ones I found most surprising.

A total of 71 percent of American Catholics favor permitting the use of artificial birth control methods. Sixty-nine percent favor married priests, and 69 percent also favor women priests.

Sixty-two percent of Catholics favor legalizing same-sex marriage. Perhaps most startling is that 74 percent of Catholics would allow legal abortions with some conditions. Probably the most important finding for our discussion is that 78 percent of American Catholics say they would follow their own consciences rather than the pope's teaching on moral issues.

The likely response to such data is: Who cares? It doesn't make any difference. The church is not a democracy. Truth is not subject to a popular vote. Yet something is wrong if the church membership is that far out of sync with official church positions. If nothing else, the church needs to consider how to respond to these realities. One approach has been to punish and condemn any dissent as it arises. Pro-choice politicians in the United States have been denied the Eucharist. The church has tried enforcing its positions and clamping down on those who disagree. It doesn't appear that this approach has changed many minds.

Another popular approach seems to be the desire to purify the church. Eliminate from the church all those who don't like its official teachings. If more than half of the world's current Catholics leave the church, that is a good thing because it makes the church better. I don't know how well that fits with Jesus' desire that "all may be one," but there are many who espouse the idea.

In education, if a teacher is failing 70 percent of his or her students, the conclusion is that the teacher is doing something wrong. According to the survey, 54 percent of Catholics believe the new pope should espouse more progressive positions. Many Catholics believe the church is failing to meet the needs of its flock. If the new pope decides to continue to do business as usual and does not reflect and consider where his flock stands on many of these issues, he will be failing in his pastoral duties.

One might ask, though, why do people stay in the church when they don't agree with everything the official church teaches? Keep in mind that it is not only liberal Catholics who disagree with church teachings. Conservative Catholics often detour from church teachings as well. They hold divergent views on the death penalty, social justice issues, and issues of war and peace. Some say, however, that it is abortion that is the most important or indeed the only issue. That view does a disservice to the breadth and depth of what is and has been the church over the centuries.

The level of dissent does represent a cultural reality that the church would do well to recognize. We are not living in the Middle Ages. Catholics are not willing to adopt a monarchical allegiance to what is demanded by a pope or group of celibate men.

Yet Catholics are not leaving the church because they believe they have a stake in the direction of the church, they are part of the church, and they expect to exert influence on how the church operates in today's world.

Blind obedience and allegiance is simply not a characteristic of people in our world today. Even conservative Catholics who are urging liberal Catholics to leave the church do not follow all papal teaching blindly. They are cafeteria Catholics, just like liberals. This is why I believe the main issue confronting the church and the new pope is one of governance. The church needs to alter its relationship to Catholics around the world, and in doing so, recognize the level of competence and ability among the world's Catholics.

In the early 20th century, American Catholicism was a church of immigrants. The parish priest was generally the most educated member of the community. The priest was an authority figure who was deferred to and trusted. He was the unquestioned leader of his community. Today, priests are serving in parishes where the parishioners know more than the priest on many subjects. A different relationship between priests and laity has begun to emerge.

It is this new relationship that the church needs to build with its people. That requires mutual respect and a willingness to listen and learn from each other. Maybe 70 percent of Catholics are wrong about some of their current beliefs, but they represent a point of view that cannot simply be ignored or repressed. Appropriate changes will come to the church under a new pope only when Rome becomes less of a top-down operation and chooses to be more inclusive. Come, Holy Spirit.

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[1] http://www.newsmax.com/US/poll-catholics-pope-married/2013/03/06/id/493430