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Trends to watch among Catholic women

Maureen Fiedler | Jun. 20, 2013 NCR Today

Looking for a good present to give your local bishop or pastor? I've found just the thing: a book full of information they need to know and digest, *American Catholics in Transition* *[1]*. The authors are three scholars: William D'Antonio, Michele Dillon and Mary Gautier.

It is a study of Catholic opinion on a wide range of issues based on 24 years of opinion surveys (1987, 1993, 1999, 2005 and 2011) of American Catholics. All of them used scientific samples of Catholics, and some questions were repeated in each survey. As a result, it's possible to measure trends among Catholics in that time period.

Most significant for me were those having to do with Catholic women.

It's important to remember that church congregations used to be predominantly made of women and that Catholic mothers have traditionally been nurturers of faith in the family. In many ways, even without leadership roles, women have been a traditional bedrock of American Catholicism.

No more. The survey data show that Catholic women's adherence to the church has declined significantly over those 24 years on two important measures: attendance at Mass (from 52 percent to 31 percent) and saying the church is important in their lives (58 percent to 38 percent). (For the record, men have always been low on these measures: 30 percent and 38 percent, respectively.)

Women are also far more likely than men to say that they, exercising conscience, should have the final say on issues like contraception and same-sex relationships.

When it comes to abortion, Catholic women have become more independent from official teaching over time, with 60 percent saying you can be a good Catholic without obeying church teaching on abortion. (Among Catholic men, the figure is 59 percent.)

All these trends are especially pronounced among women in their 20s and 30s. And interestingly, Hispanic Catholic women show no almost no differences from Caucasian women on these issues and trends.

The upshot of all of this? Clearly, Catholic women are increasingly alienated from a church structure that provides them with no real opportunities for leadership, does not listen to their views on issues important in their lives and has been worsened by the sex abuse crisis. Attacks against groups of women like the Leadership Conference of Women Religious do not help.

This eroding of women's allegiance has serious implications for the future of the church. Members of the hierarchy would do well to read this survey in detail, let the results sink in and start pushing for changes.

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Links:
[1] http://www.amazon.com/American-Catholics-Transition-William-DAntonio/dp/1442219920