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# Studies of US Catholics provide insight on synod questions

Brian Roewe | Dec. 13, 2013
Synod on the Family

Amid the scramble to gather new data ahead of next October's synod on the family, a question arises: Will church officials incorporate the wealth of insights collected in recent decades by researchers inside and outside the U.S. church?

In late October, the Vatican sent to national bishops' conferences a preparatory document and questionnaire for the 2014 Synod of Bishops on the family with the directive to circulate them "as widely as possible." The questions ask about topics like knowledge and acceptance of church teachings, family transference of the faith, marital issues (including natural law, divorce/annulments, and same-sex unions), and contraception.

Much attention has focused on how various bishops and dioceses would distribute the questionnaire, which *NCR* made public [1], and gather responses. While reform groups and lay organizations have joined the data collection push, valid research from social scientists already provides brushstrokes toward a portrait of the modern American Catholic family.

For example, *NCR* has cosponsored* a longitudinal study on American Catholic beliefs and practices with surveys conducted every six years since 1987. The most recent version, titled "Catholics in America," appeared Oct. 28, 2011, under the authorship of William V. D?Antonio, a senior fellow at the Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies at the Catholic University of America, Mary Gautier, senior research associate at the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, and Michele Dillon. Similar, extensive work has been conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University, and the Pew Research Center's Religion and Public Life Project.

While not all questions posed by the Vatican fall under the scope of previously conducted studies, a wealth of information still exists.

Currently, Catholics in the United States number 78.2 million, about a quarter of the population. About 25 percent of U.S. Catholics attend Mass weekly. According to the 2011 D?Antonio et al survey, more than half are of the post-Vatican II (born 1961-78) and millennial (born 1979-93) generations. A third are Hispanic. As of 2011, two-thirds have been married (54 percent currently, 69 percent of those validated by the church), and 10 percent live with a partner, while a fifth of respondents reported they have never married.

**Familiarity with teachings**

The synod survey [2] first asks how Catholics understand (Question 1a) and accept (1b) family-related church teachings contained in the Bible, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Familiaris Consortio* and other documents. Though not specifically gauging comprehension of these texts, recent studies provide insight into U.S. Catholics' familiarity with such teachings.

In its 2007 survey on marriage, CARA found 34 percent of Catholics reporting high familiarity with church teachings on marriage, and 37 percent somewhat familiar. The percentages jumped when examined through Mass attendance, what CARA identified as "a strong indicator of the general importance of Catholicism in a person's life and of his or her level of commitment to living out the faith." Among weekly attendees, 59 percent describe themselves as very familiar with marriage teachings.

Catholics showed little interest (30 percent) in further learning of marriage teaching, with CARA noting "perhaps because they are already relatively familiar with Church teaching on marriage." At least a quarter expressed interest in learning more about commitment and fidelity; divorce, remarriage and annulments; and interfaith marriage. Just 19 percent were interested in further information about the church's family planning teachings. The preferred medium for such information was print or online resources (40 percent) -- almost twice as much as interpersonal interaction, whether in groups, retreats or conversations with their pastor.

For the most part, CARA reported that Catholics could accurately identify church teachings on marriage -- it is a sacrament when between two baptized persons; openness to children is an essential part; considered good for individuals and the community -- but other studies found that recognition did not necessarily equal adoption.

In the 2011 D?Antonio et al survey, researchers pointed to a post-*Humanae Vitae* effect, where the Vatican's rejection of contraceptives dented its moral authority, evident in the five surveys conducted since 1987. The latest figures show Catholics siding with personal conscience as the final decision-maker on the morality of remarriage without an annulment (47 percent), abortion (52 percent), nonmarital sex (53 percent), homosexual activity (57 percent) and the use of contraceptives (66 percent).

Further, Pew found in 2009 that unaffiliated former Catholics, when asked why they left their faith, cited unhappiness with teachings on abortion and homosexuality (56 percent), on birth control (48 percent, too strict for the vast majority), and on divorce and remarriage (33 percent).

At the end of Section 1, the Vatican asks what cultural factors have hindered reception of church teaching. Pew found about a third of Catholics said pop culture or civil law at least somewhat influenced their view of marriage, but more pointed to family experiences (two-thirds) and their faith (55 percent).

In two separate 2011 polls, the PRRI found familiarity a factor in opinions toward abortion or same-sex marriage: Among the 61 percent of Catholics who have a gay friend or family member, two-thirds favored legalizing same-sex marriage (up 11 percent from all Catholics), and more than half of the 60 percent of Catholics who know a woman who has had an abortion support its legalization in most cases.

**Marriage and the church**

A good deal of the synod survey focuses on marriage. Section 3 addresses marriage preparation (Question 3a), family prayer (3b), passing on the faith (3c), and pastoral care to couples in formation and crisis (3f).

According to CARA's 2007 marriage survey, 90 percent of currently married Catholics met with a priest before their wedding. Nearly half took a pre-marriage assessment (more likely among millennials) or read church-provided literature; at least a quarter attended a marriage prep class or met with a mentor couple. Nearly two-thirds found each program at least somewhat helpful, and most discussed issues of trust, commitment, openness to children, intimacy and family backgrounds.

After the wedding, Catholic couples are less likely to seek counsel. By an almost two-to-one margin, Catholic couples more likely would not ask for help with marital troubles, though post-Vatican II and millennial couples are more likely than their elders to consider it. In those cases, Catholics turn to family, friends and prayer before

consulting a priest, deacon or parish counselor. The areas of spiritual life, effective communication, and balancing family and career drew the most interest (about 20 percent each) among attractive types of church-sponsored programs, with parenting ranking lower.

In the cases of divorced and separated Catholics, while 88 percent met with a priest before marriage, two-thirds of those divorced did not seek help before their marriage ended; however, weekly Mass attendees were three times more likely to seek help. Separated and divorced Catholics ranked communication, trust and finances among their most challenging issues, with a third believing church-sponsored sessions may have helped communication.

On prayer, CARA reported a quarter of married couples prayed together at least once a week, and 7 percent read the Bible or other religious materials. More than a third always attend Mass together.

While not limited in scope to married couples, the 2011 D?Antonio et al survey reported more than half of Catholics pray daily, and 85 percent describe a daily prayer life as somewhat or very important. CARA's 2008 sacraments survey showed 93 percent of Catholics rating prayer and reflection as a very or somewhat important aspect of the Mass (about half of millennials, defined by CARA as born after 1981), and 16 percent pray the rosary at least once a month.

In terms of addressing the "current generational crisis," as the Vatican describes it (Question 3c), U.S. Catholics continue to see importance in younger generations growing up Catholic (77 percent), but fewer hold it as a strong belief, dropping 13 percent from 2005 (53 percent) to 2011 (40 percent) in the 2011 D?Antonio et al surveys.

As for the success in passing on the faith, nearly 90 percent of post-Vatican II adults (defined by CARA as born 1961-81) have received the sacraments of first Communion and reconciliation; about eight in 10 have been confirmed, with a slightly higher rate of millennials receiving Communion (85 percent) and reconciliation (84 percent), with 69 percent confirmed. In contrast, at least 90 percent of pre-Vatican II (born before 1943) and Vatican II (born 1943-60) Catholics received those sacraments, according to CARA's 2008 sacrament survey. Three out of four Catholics with children believe it's important they receive all three sacraments.

While millennials rank lower than older generations in finding importance in various parts of the Mass, they nearly match pre-Vatican II Catholics (85 percent to 86 percent) in affirming Jesus' presence in the Eucharist, and lead in seeing the importance of receiving the Eucharist (nine in 10).

Overall, 14 percent of Catholics rank their faith as the most important part of their daily life; post-Vatican II (40 percent) and millennial (34 percent) Catholics place faith at least among the most important parts of their lives. However, millennials are less likely than other generations to identify strongly as Catholics, with just half strongly agreeing they are proud to be Catholic; under a third viewing themselves as a practicing Catholic and agreeing that the sacraments are essential to their faith; and one in five seeing a moral obligation to help the poor. About two-thirds of millennials have no doubts in God as the father and creator, and seven in 10 believe in one God in the Trinity.

**'Irregular situations'**

In Sections 2, 4 and 5, the Vatican questionnaire delves into natural law and issues such as cohabitation, divorce, separation, remarriage and same-sex unions.

Few, if any, surveys poll Catholics' position on natural law -- specifically the idea of the union between man and woman -- though a March PRRI poll provides insights into Catholics' view of the nature of a person's sexual orientation. They found 65 percent of Catholics view a gay person's sexual orientation as unalterable, versus a

quarter who believed it could change. And while fewer Catholics believe sex between same-sex adults is morally acceptable (44 percent) than believe it morally wrong (47 percent), 57 percent favor same-sex marriage's legalization, creating an interesting divide, said Robert Jones, the institute's CEO.

"Catholics are drawing a distinction between moral judgments that they're making for themselves, and what they think ought to be enshrined in law," he told *NCR*.

The 2011 D?Antonio et al in *NCR* survey augments that position, finding 57 percent of Catholics viewing the individual as the final moral authority on same-sex relations, up 11 percent from 2005. The rise in Catholics' acceptance of same-sex unions mirrors national legislative trends, where 16 states now permit such marriages, and a June Supreme Court decision made homosexual and heterosexual married couples equal under federal laws.

In response to the question of Catholics' attitudes toward same-sex unions (Question 5b), the answer appears favorable to such unions. The 54 percent of Catholics supporting same-sex marriage Pew found in June represented an almost 20 percent increase from 2004. The numbers remain consistent when broken down by ethnicity (56 percent whites, 58 percent Hispanics), PRRI found, as well as more than three-fourths of all Catholics believing society should accept same-sex relationships. Fifty-five percent favor same-sex couples adopting children.

Looking at what the Vatican questionnaire describes as difficult marital situations (Questions 4a, c, d), the 2011 D?Antonio et al survey shows a 10th of Catholics cohabiting with a partner, 2 percent separated and 9 percent divorced. While nearly half (45 percent) of divorced Catholics in CARA's 2007 marriage survey (with a 12 percent divorce rate) had married in the church, the vast majority (85 percent) never sought an annulment. That year, the Vatican granted 35,000 annulments to American Catholics. The 2011 D?Antonio et al in *NCR* survey also reported a decline among those seeking annulments, offering the following explanation: "The negative publicity surrounding annulments ... and perhaps too, individual Catholics' own reservations more generally with the Catholic Church's teachings on marriage, divorce, and remarriage, may account for the decline in annulment petitions."

While little data exists showing the feelings of divorced, separated and cohabiting Catholics toward their "irregular situations" (Question 4d), whether they seek the sacraments (4e) or a simpler annulment process (4f), some studies give insight into how Catholics as a whole view divorce. CARA's 2007 marriage study showed 76 percent of Catholics deeming divorce acceptable in some cases, most notably in situations of physical abuse (96 percent), emotional abuse (92 percent) and infidelity (85 percent). Additionally, nearly half of highly committed Catholics believe one can be a good Catholic without adhering to church teachings on divorce and remarriage (46 percent) or what constitutes a valid marriage (48 percent).

***Humanae Vitae***

In Section 7, the synod survey addresses Catholic views on *Humanae Vitae* and family planning. In an August 2011 poll, PRRI found 58 percent of Catholics (versus 55 percent of Americans) viewed sex outside of marriage as morally acceptable, and 37 percent viewed it as morally wrong. Another poll, conducted in October 2012, revealed eight in 10 Catholics deeming contraceptive use as morally acceptable; in a March 2012 poll, Catholics split (49 percent each) on whether birth control should be available to teens age 16 and up. A Pew 2012 poll found only four in 10 Catholics believing contraceptives morally acceptable, versus 15 percent saying it's morally wrong. A much-disputed statistic cited by the Obama administration estimated 98 percent of Catholic women use contraceptives, while an October 2012 National Center for Health Statistics report showed 61 percent of Catholic women age 15-44 using some contraceptive method.

With regard to family planning, just 8 percent of married Catholics responding to CARA's marriage survey

showed interest in attending a church-sponsored session on natural family planning. Meanwhile, 78 percent of Catholics, equal to national trends, favor comprehensive sex education taught in public schools, with 20 percent opposed. Fifty-four percent believe abortion should be legal in all or most cases, though 57 percent believe it is morally wrong.

In assessing the state of U.S. Catholicism in *NCR*, the research team for the2011 D?Antonio et al survey starkly observed: "Catholics today, as they have done for at least 25 years, define Catholicism on their own terms." Central to those terms, lead researcher William D'Antonio told *NCR*, throughout the survey's five editions have been four aspects: Jesus, the sacraments, Mary and concern for the poor. D'Antonio said what has changed is Catholics' thinking on marriage, evident in divorce rates and openness to same-sex unions. Experience, he observed, has played a dominant role.

"Lived experience is trumping abstract teaching. Wins it all the time," he said.

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***Editor's Note:** The original version of this article did not make clear that *NCR* was a cosponsor the study that was reported in its pages in 2011. *NCR* was one of six financial cosponsor of that survey. The authorship of the research of that survey belongs to William V. D?Antonio, a senior fellow at the Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies at the Catholic University of America, Mary Gautier, senior research associate at the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, and Michele Dillon, professor of sociology and chair of the department at the University of New Hampshire. For more details and complete list of sponsors, see **NCRonline.org/node/27240** [4].

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