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Contraception, the Univision poll, and the pope

Robert McClory | Feb. 18, 2014 NCR Today

When Pope Francis meets with his Council of Cardinals, I hope and pray the group takes more than a passing glance at the recent Univision poll [1] on controversial matters in the Catholic church. This major media organization sought the opinions of approximately 12,000 Catholics in 12 countries across five continents and in nine languages on subjects ranging from abortion to women priests. To no one's surprise, the results confirmed that this worldwide church is deeply split over key teachings with no resolution in sight. For example, while 83 percent of those polled in France thought women should be allowed in the priesthood, only 18 percent of those polled in the Congo, France's onetime colony, thought it was a good idea.

I was especially struck by one result: that concerning the use of contraceptives. Here, there was a veritable landslide of support for their use over almost the entire world. The result was an overall 79 percent favoring contraception in opposition to church teaching.

In Latin America, the approval rate was 91percent. In Brazil, it was 93 percent; in Argentina, 91 percent; in Mexico, 88 percent. In Europe, the overall approval rate was 89 percent: 90 percent in Spain, 84 percent in Italy, 75 percent in Poland. The United States came in at 78 percent approval (somewhat lower than most American polls have reported in recent years). So who doesn't favor contraception? Only two countries, both in Africa: Uganda and the Congo, each registering only 44 percent approval.

Assuming the Univision figures are accurate or nearly accurate, that 79 percent figure should make Catholics stop in their tracks, especially Francis, his Cabinet and all the bishops who will participate in the synod on the family later this year.

It's been 45 years since Pope Paul VI's memorable encyclical *Humanae Vitae* forbidding all forms of artificial contraception was issued. It was made clear at that time that Paul did not consider the encyclical an infallible declaration, though nevertheless binding on all Catholics. Some theologians then argued that the doctrine itself was infallible since it had been taught universally and without interruption by the church from the beginning. That argument is hardly convincing because the very process of human fertilization was not understood until the middle of the 19th century. And even if the process had been understood, there has been a substantial interruption in acceptance of this church teaching since the publication of *Humanae Vitae*, standing now at 79 percent of Catholics.

So what can Catholic leadership do? There is a time-honored pathway that has been quietly but effectively used in similar situations in past centuries. It is the idea of a doctrine that has not been accepted, not received by the People of God. Involved here, too, is the notion of the sense of the faithful, proposed boldly by John Henry Newman. When a disagreement persists for a long period of time and affects a substantial proportion of the faithful, then new deliberation must begin, Newman said. The so-called teaching church must consult with all sides and all those affected by the troublesome teaching. Doors and windows must be opened, and everyone must listen.

I think most observers doubt that any serious scrutiny leading to resolution will occur during the pontificate of

Pope Francis. He has indicated he does not wish to touch the hot buttons of Catholic doctrine, contraception being among the hottest. What he could do is encourage seminars and discussions involving theologians, priests and laity regarding various aspects of contemporary moral Catholic theology, especially on sexual matters. He doesn't have to solve the problem by himself. But perhaps he could encourage knowledgeable people to talk openly about the issues without fear of being silenced or otherwise punished. That alone would be a tremendous first step forward.

Meanwhile, the ban on contraception sits virtually invisible and disregarded by an overwhelming segment of Catholic laity, a 45-year-old elephant in the middle of the living room.

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[1] http://www.univision.com/interactivos/openpage/2014-02-06/la-voz-del-pueblo-portada-en