

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

February 19, 2014 at 8:27am

How should the church respond to Univision poll results?

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NCR Today

A new poll of 12 countries with large Catholic populations has been released through the Spanish-language Univision network. It mirrors other recent poll results, but also provides some interesting data about how Catholics around the world agree and disagree with each other and the church.

Worldwide, there is significant disagreement with church teaching on divorce, abortion and contraception. Results show greater division on the topic of married or female priests and general agreement with church leaders on the question of same-sex marriage.

Africa and Asia represent more traditional church viewpoints while Europe, North America and parts of Latin America are less inclined to follow church teaching.

Let me just mention a few examples. Only 19 percent of European Catholics believe divorced and remarried Catholics should be barred from Communion. Up to 75 percent of African Catholics agree with divorced Catholics not being admitted to Communion. Forty percent of U.S. Catholics oppose gay marriage while 99 percent of those in Africa are opposed.

There is one area where there is widespread agreement. On the question of contraception, 78 percent of all Catholics support the use of contraception. Ninety percent of South American Catholics support it, and 68 percent of Catholics in the Philippines support the use of contraception.

The upcoming Synod of Bishops on the family will have an opportunity to address some of these issues. What are they to do? Since there is much support for church teaching on the African continent, should the church simply ignore voices from other parts of the world? One problem with that approach is that as time goes on, public opinion in all parts of the world appears to be moving further away from church teachings, particularly on these important family issues.

Pope Francis has said that everyone has something worthwhile to say. He has also resurrected the Second Vatican Council as formative church teaching. He has stated clearly in his recent communication speech that we must dialogue, and that means not seeing our positions as absolute.

Will the church be listening? Certainly, there is a real possibility for change on divorced Catholics receiving Communion. But is that it?

I believe the time has come for the church to reassess its positions on some moral and family issues. The church is in a box, and it has been so since at least the 13th century. We have taken an Aristotelian philosopher, Thomas Aquinas, and made him into an infallible presenter of the truth. We continue to propose that any reasonable thinking person is bound to recognize the truth of the church's positions. Natural law is open to all, and if you can't see the rightness of the church's position, you are either guilty of bad faith or lack the ability to think logically.

The problem is fewer and fewer people are seeing things the way the church sees them. Are they all in bad faith, or has the church continued to stick to categories and methods of reasoning that are no longer applicable? The scholastic formulations of Aquinas do not represent infallible teachings, whether on the Eucharist (transubstantiation) or on moral issues.

One difficulty with the church's position is that once certain presuppositions have been accepted, everything makes sense within that framework. Take the ancient Greek philosopher Zeno, one of my all-time favorites. If you accept his premises, it is clear there is no way the hare can ever catch the tortoise. Yet common sense tells us that something is wrong with that reasoning. Perhaps the Catholic people are trying to tell us that something is wrong with some of church reasoning.

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The people are much closer to the use of contraceptives, for example, than most priests. As Pope Francis might say, we need to smell the sheep. I think we need a different starting point. What better starting point than the experiences of real people? Issues of population control or even the financial struggles of individual families can be summarily dismissed by those for whom these are not personal concerns. Ivory tower theology needs to come to terms with the realities individual Catholics face day after day in their lives.

If there was ever a time for church leaders to listen to the people, it might be now. The upcoming Synod of Bishops is a good starting point. Pope Francis has led the way with his loving outreach to people and his endorsement of dialogue. A church a little less sure of itself might serve as the best beacon of light for all of us on the ongoing journey of faith.

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