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Trends in Catholic commitment stable over time

Michele Dillon | Oct. 24, 2011
Catholics in America

Members of the parish choir sing during Mass at Our Lady of the Isle Church in Shelter Island Heights, N.Y., in a 2007 file photo. (CNS/Long Island Catholic/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Commitment

American Catholics continue to maintain a moderate to high degree of commitment to the church. As in past surveys, we assessed our respondents? commitment by combining their responses to three separate questions: ?How important is the Catholic church to you personally??; ?Aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you go to Mass??; and ?On a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 indicating you would never leave the church, and 7 indicating you might leave the church, where would you place yourself?? We categorized highly committed Catholics as those who said that the church was the most important or among the most important parts of their life, who attended church once a week or more often, and who placed themselves at either one or two on the seven-point scale. Using these high-threshold criteria, 19 percent of our respondents were highly committed Catholics, an additional two-thirds (66 percent) were moderately committed, and 14 percent had low levels of commitment. Clearly, for Catholics, moderate commitment is the norm.

The percentage of Catholics who are highly committed to the church has declined ---- from 27 to 19 percent -- in the 25 years since we first began tracking American Catholics? levels of commitment. Nonetheless, there is a relative stability in the commitment patterns over time. In 2005, for example, 21 percent of the respondents were classified as highly committed Catholics, and this figure was 23 percent in both the 1993 and 1999 surveys. Further, the percentage of Catholics with a low level of commitment has not increased over the past 25 years; in fact it has slightly declined over time (see Figure 6). The relative stability in Catholic commitment is all the more noteworthy given that since the late 1990s, there has been a sharp decline both in the proportion of Americans who identify with a religious denomination and in the proportion who report weekly church attendance. In sum, while significant numbers of Catholics may leave the church (Pew Forum 2008), the snapshot of current Catholics that our surveys capture at any one point in time (e.g., 1987, 1993, 1999, 2005), suggests that despite Catholic fluidity (due to people leaving, the aging of current cohorts, the influx of new immigrants), the level of commitment of those who are Catholic at a given time is not dramatically changing.

And yet we certainly live in a changing church and in a changing society where religion is losing some of its supreme salience.

The highly committed

There is not a great deal of demographic variation in patterns of Catholic commitment. Catholic men (18 percent), for example, are basically as committed as women (21 percent), and similar proportions of Hispanics (19 percent) and non-Hispanics (19 percent) are highly committed. The most notable variation is due to age or generation. Older Catholics are far more likely than younger-age Catholics to be highly committed to the church, with twice as many pre-Vatican II (41 percent) than Vatican II (20 percent) and younger Catholic generations (16 percent) classified as highly committed. Additionally, while educational attainment does not impact Catholic commitment, Catholic education does. By as many as 8 to 9 percentage points, respondents who attended a Catholic elementary or high school or a Catholic college are more likely than others to be highly committed Catholics. Marital status also matters. Married Catholics (23 percent) are more likely than never-married (16 percent) and cohabiting Catholics (8 percent), to be highly committed to the church.

As one would expect, highly committed Catholics are far more likely than their less committed peers to affirm the personal importance and meaningfulness of the sacraments and theological beliefs (e.g., the Resurrection), the church?s apostolic tradition, and the church?s socio-moral teachings. By the same token, by a margin of at least two to one, they are more likely than other Catholics to endorse the Vatican?s teaching authority and less likely than other Catholics to emphasize the moral autonomy of individuals in decisions regarding sexual behavior.

The clear differences between highly committed and other Catholics should not be taken to mean that highly committed Catholics march in lockstep with Vatican orthodoxy. Quite the contrary. As is true of Catholics as a whole, many highly committed Catholics construe a Catholic identity that allows for a fair amount of individual autonomy regarding the practice of Catholicism. For example, 60 percent say that one can be a good Catholic without obeying the church?s teaching on artificial contraception, and close to a majority say that a person can be a good Catholic without going to weekly Mass (48 percent), without their marriage being approved by the church (48 percent), and without obeying the church?s teaching on divorce and remarriage (46 percent) (see Figure 5). It is noteworthy that while two-thirds of highly committed Catholics value the papacy as a meaningful aspect of Catholicism (65 percent), a similar proportion also values the fact that Catholics can disagree with church teachings and still remain loyal to the church (62 percent). Indeed, just over half (57 percent) of highly committed Catholics say that the teaching authority claimed by the Vatican is very important to them personally.

In view of the structural challenges confronting the church as a result of the shortage of priests, those exploring the possibilities for institutional change will likely find some support among highly committed Catholics. Although a celibate male clergy has long been part of church tradition, only 40 percent of highly committed Catholics regard this aspect of Catholicism as very important. Further, close to half, 46 percent, support a role in the church for women as priests, a slight increase from the 40 percent found in the 2005 survey; and two-thirds (65 percent) of highly committed Catholics express support for women as deacons, about the same as the 2005 figure (68 percent).

Change since 2005

The profile of the Catholic identity of highly committed Catholics emergent from the 2011 survey is substantially in line with the patterns from the 2005 survey. In particular, the prioritization of specific aspects of Catholicism (e.g., the Resurrection, 98 percent; the sacraments, 96 percent; Mary, 93 percent) over other aspects (e.g., a celibate clergy, 40 percent) is consistent with the priorities indicated by highly committed Catholics in 2005. Notwithstanding this consistency, there are, however, some notable dips in the level of support for certain

aspects of Catholicism. Far fewer of today?s highly committed Catholics compared to those in 2005 see the Vatican?s teaching authority (57 percent, down from 71 percent) and the church?s teachings that oppose same-sex marriage (59 percent, down from 72 percent) as very important. There has also been a decline in the proportion of highly committed Catholics who regard devotions (from 79 percent in 2005 to 70 percent today) and the church?s concern for the poor (93 percent to 86 percent) as very important. On the other hand, equal numbers of high-commitment Catholics today (75 percent) as in 2005 (76 percent) say that the church?s opposition to abortion is very important to them personally.

Further, there is remarkable consistency across several dimensions in how highly committed Catholics construe what it means to be a good Catholic. There is little or no change since 2005 in the numbers of highly committed Catholics who say that one can be a good Catholic without going to Mass every Sunday (49 percent in 2005, 48 percent in 2011); without obeying the church?s teaching on birth control (64 percent in 2005, 60 percent in 2011), divorce and remarriage (43 percent in 2005, 46 percent in 2011), and abortion (31 percent then and now); and without having one?s marriage approved by the church (49 percent in 2005, 48 percent in 2011).

Amid this consistency, there is a significant shift in highly committed Catholics? understanding of a good Catholic?s obligations to the parish. Whereas 40 percent of highly committed Catholics in 2005 said that a person could be a good Catholic without donating time or money to help the parish, this number has increased to 56 percent within the past six years. Alongside this, there has also been an increase (from 30 percent to 39 percent) in the proportion of highly committed Catholics who say that one can be a good Catholic without donating time or money to help the poor.

Summary

Despite recent declines in American denominational attachments and church attendance, the trends in Catholics? commitment are relatively stable, with one in five Catholics highly committed to the church. Highly committed Catholics tend to be older, married and Catholic-educated. They clearly differ from other Catholics in terms of the personal importance they attach to various aspects of the Catholic tradition, and are comparatively more deferential toward Vatican authority and church teachings. Yet, they also emphasize autonomy from the church and see a lot of latitude in what is entailed in being a good Catholic. They are also clearly open to structural changes in the church. Although the attitudes of today?s highly committed Catholics are similar to those of the highly committed Catholics in the 2005 survey, there has been a significant decline in the percentages of highly committed Catholics who affirm the Vatican?s teaching authority, church teaching on same-sex marriage, and Catholics? obligations to the parish and to the poor.

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- Figure 5
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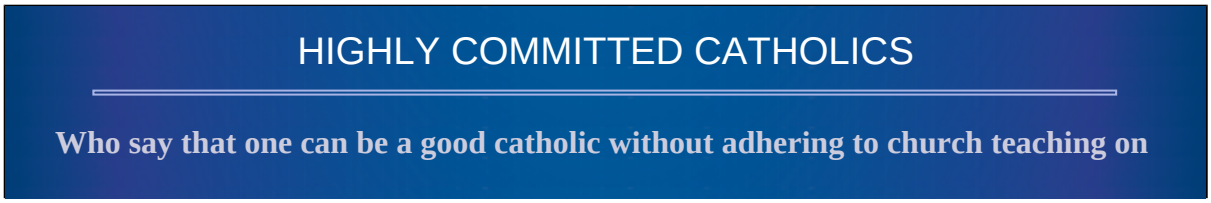
FIGURE 5



specific issues, 2005 and 2011

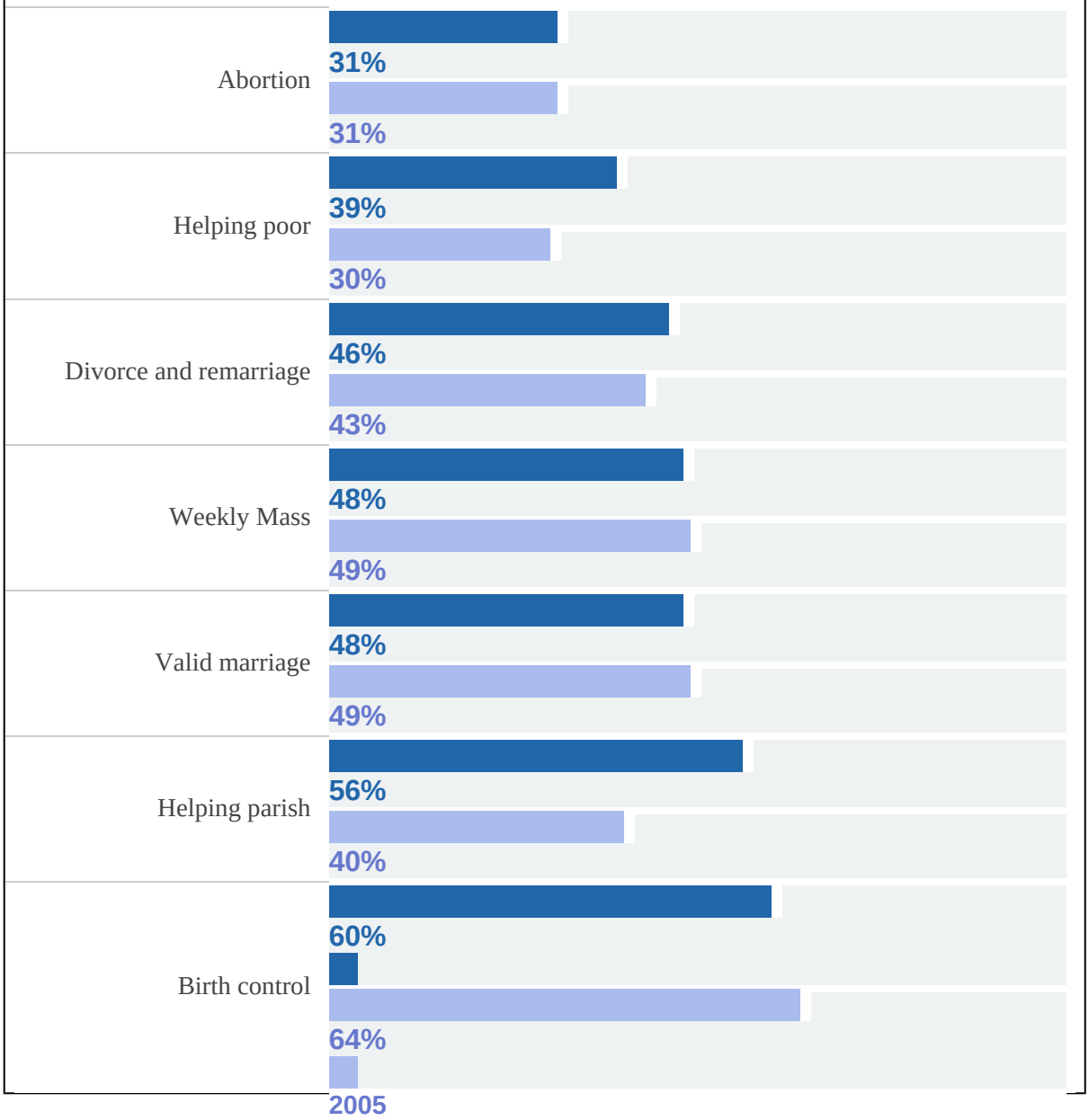


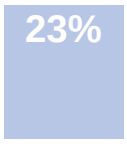
FIGURE 6

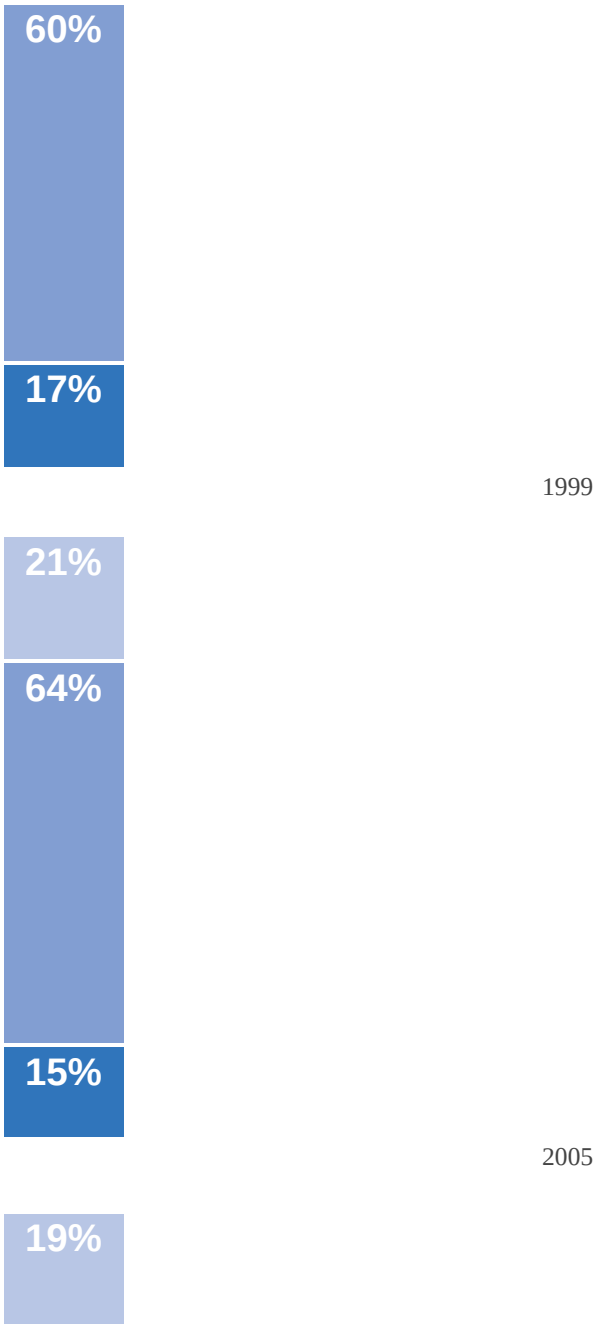
TRENDS IN COMMITMENT TO THE CHURCH

1987-2011

1987

1993

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