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Group steps in for US bishops, collects Vatican-requested data

Joshua J. McElwee | Nov. 1, 2013 NCR Today
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A Catholic nonprofit in the D.C. area is offering to collect responses from Catholics to a Vatican survey asking their opinions on church teachings on contraception, same-sex marriage and divorce.

The survey was sent by the Vatican [1] in mid-October to national bishops' conferences around the world. An accompanying letter signed by Archbishop Lorenzo Baldisseri asks that the conferences distribute the poll "immediately as widely as possible to deaneries and parishes so that input from local sources can be received."

But it is unclear what steps the U.S. bishops' conference, currently headed by New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, will take to pursue such an effort.

The nonprofit, Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, has made a survey based on the Vatican's questionnaire available online. [2]

Christopher Hale, a senior fellow with the group, said in an email that his organization sent a link to the survey via email to its some 30,000 members Friday morning. Within two hours, Hale said, the group had seen more than 300 responses.

"Our response has been overwhelming," Hale said. "We've already hundreds of people answer the survey with beautiful or distressing stories about their experience with their local church life."

The Vatican is asking bishops' conferences to undertake the survey in preparation for an upcoming synod of bishops, to be held Oct. 5-19, 2014, on the theme "Pastoral Challenges of the family in the context of evangelization."

The Vatican questionnaire was sent Oct. 18 from Baldisseri, the general secretary of the synod's Vatican office, to the presidents of the world's individual bishops' conferences.

It asks the conferences to quiz their populations on topics that sometimes have sharply divided the U.S. church, like the Catholic teaching prohibiting the use of artificial contraception, the possibility of a divorced Catholic to remarry or receive Communion, and the number of young people choosing to live together before marrying.

A spokeswoman for the U.S. bishops' conference, Helen Osman, said in a statement Thursday "it will be up to each bishop to determine what would be the most useful way of gathering information to provide to Rome."

Responses to the questions posed by the Vatican have been mixed, Hale said.

"Dozens of separated and divorced Catholics noted that they don't feel welcomed in their Church communities because they don't have access to the sacraments," he said. "Once again, dozens of gay and lesbian Catholics expressed the same sentiment. One noted how she felt like her treatment in her parish was [similar] to the military's 'don't ask, don't tell' policy."

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