



# HOW LAITY SEE THE STATE OF AMERICAN CATHOLICISM

Dean R. Hoge

A team of four sociologists has carried out new research on attitudes of lay Catholics about the church. We have written a book, *American Catholics Today: New Realities of Their Faith and Their Church*, by William D'Antonio, James Davidson, Dean Hoge, and Mary Gautier, to be published by Rowman and Littlefield in March 2007. The book discusses numerous findings, two of which I will summarize here. One is about generational differences and the other is about what laity see as the main problems of the American church.

## GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

Younger generations are different from any Catholics in the American past. This is widely known, but it needs two points of clarification. The first is that young adults are different from their elders not because they are "going through a phase." On most basic life values and attitudes, the viewpoints of young adults after about age 25 continue more or less unchanged through the life cycle. That is, research has not supported statements such as "all people become more conservative as they get older." It is true that old people are more conservative on many topics than young adults, but it is not because people change in any predictable way with age. Rather, it is because the young adults enter their adult years at a different place

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than their parents did years ago.

Sociologists use a concept called "impressionable years." It holds that basic life values and worldviews are formed during the ten-year period from about ages 12 to 22, more than in any other time earlier or later. Most research shows this. Individuals may change in various ways later, depending on life experiences, but overall the picture is continuity.

There is an exception to this: church attendance, which is affected by other life cycle factors including marriage and family life, increases in the 30s after a lowpoint in the 20s. So, what I said about continuation of values does not seem to apply to the rate of church attendance. However, it does apply to most other basic attitudes about life priorities, morals, and social attitudes. The lesson here is that we can predict that tomorrow's middle adults will be similar to today's young adults.

Never before in history have we had Catholic young adults so highly educated, so well informed, so well traveled, so aware of cultural differences, so determined to think for themselves, and so affluent, as we have today. Every institution, including the Catholic Church, needs to prepare for this new generation. There is much to rejoice about, and we should love these young people. Above all, we should not criticize them for being different from older people, for example, saying that "they are not as religious as we were." They are religious, but in a different way.

Our research group analyzed generational differences in the laity today. In the line-up of four genera-



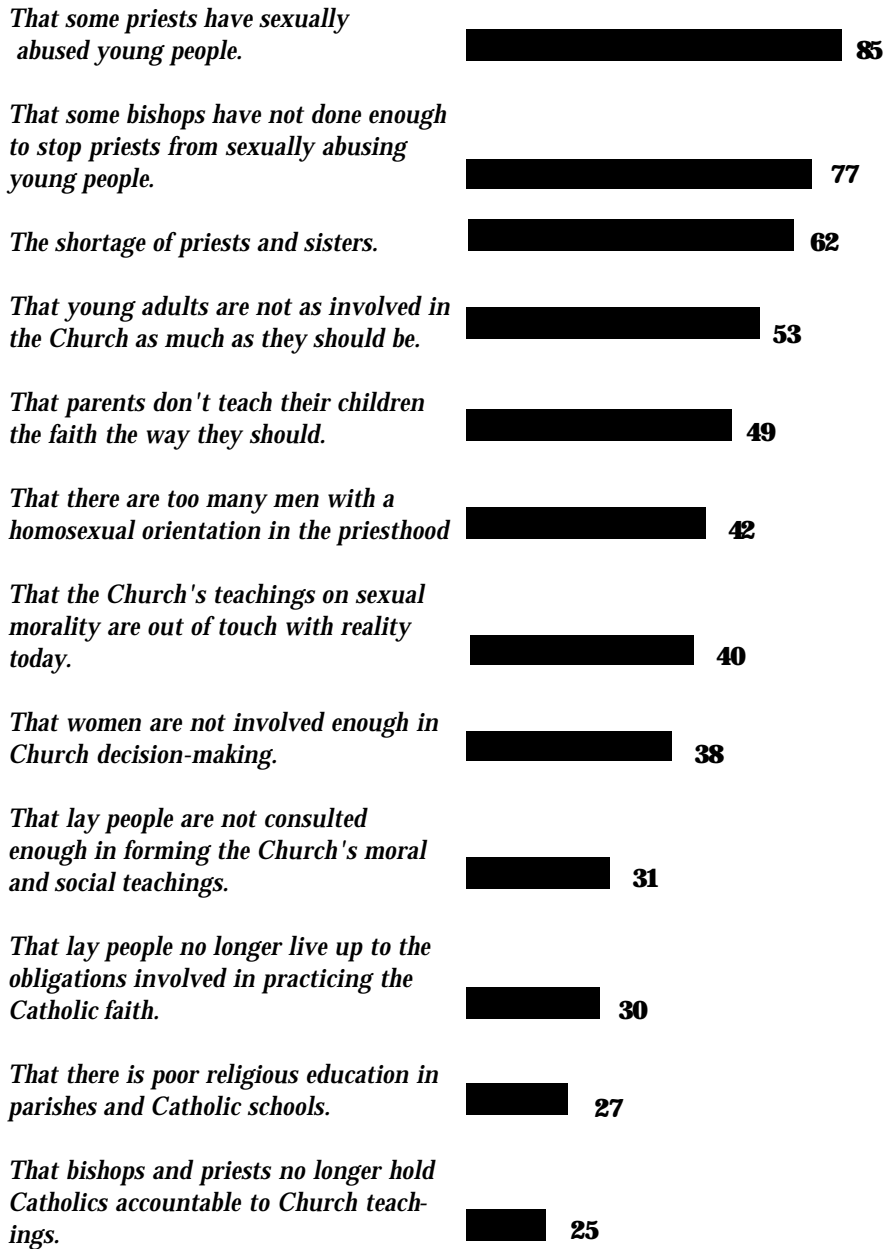
tions from old to young (pre-Vatican II—born in 1940 or earlier, Vatican II—born in 1941 to 1960, post-Vatican II—born in 1961 to 1978, and millennials, born in 1979 or later), there is one main location of attitude shift. It is between the pre-Vatican II generation and the generations that followed. That is, people born in 1940 or before are less accepting of recent cultural changes in America and the church than the following generations.

Differences among the three younger generations are smaller, basically a mild trend in the direction of greater individualism. We did not find a "rebound," as some have alleged, that the youngest generation is returning to the religious attitudes and commitments of the 1950s.

The difference between old and young is similar to the historical trend in the broader culture, that is, a gradual change toward more individualism and reliance on conscience, and toward preference for a more collegial church with lay involvement in decision-making. The biggest generational differences are on the moral issues surrounding sex and gender. These include contraception, sex outside of marriage, and homosexual behavior. Young adults tend to see these issues as situational.



**HOW MUCH OF A PROBLEM IS EACH OF THESE?  
(PERCENTAGE SAYING "A SERIOUS PROBLEM")**



While the laity are gradually moving toward wanting a more collegial church, the priesthood is moving in a different direction. Research on American priests shows that the youngest diocesan priests are inclined to be less collegial with laity than are older priests. Therefore, the trends among young laity and young priests are divergent. This may produce tensions between laity and

younger diocesan priests unless communications and discussions are open.

**MAIN PROBLEMS OF TODAY'S CHURCH**

In 2003, we asked a sample of laity what they think are the biggest problems facing the Catholic Church in America today. We stated twelve problems often men-

tioned in the Catholic press and asked them how serious each one is. The chart on this page shows the percentage saying each is a "serious problem."

The top four are "That some priests have sexually abused young people," "That some bishops have not done enough to stop priests from sexually abusing young people," "The shortage of priests and sisters," and "That young adults are not as involved in the church as much as they should be." These four are not expressions of a single point of view in American Catholicism. They cross specific ideological lines.

The top two are really a single problem—the sexual abuse crisis. It has two facets, that some priests abused young people and that the bishops didn't do enough to stop the problem. In sum, the top three problems are the sexual abuse scandal, the shortage of priests and sisters, and the lack of involvement of young adults. Let me comment on each.

**THE SEXUAL ABUSE SCANDAL**

What can be done to put this behind us? The only research I know of estimates how much the scandal negatively affected commitment to the Catholic Church, attendance, and giving. The overall finding is that the negative impact was short-term, not long-term. Mass attendance was slightly lower in 2002 and 2003 than before, but it rose again later. For financial giving the pattern is the same. The biggest negative impact was on diocesan giving and local giving in situations where the sexual abuse crisis hit hardest. The most serious damage has been in Boston.

Based on responses in lay surveys, we should move to more lay involvement in advisory and overseer roles at the national and diocesan levels. Also, the Catholic Church should do better financial



reporting at all levels. In 2003, 77 percent of all Catholics said this.

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## THE SHORTAGE OF PRIESTS & SISTERS

Here I will emphasize the shortage of priests. Whereas the American Catholic community is growing by about 10 to 12 percent per decade, the number of priests available is declining by about 12 to 14 percent per decade. How can we carry out the church's God-given mission under these new circumstances? We cannot continue doing what we did in the past, since priests aren't available. The main problem is maintaining availability of the Eucharist. As we'll see later, this is a serious issue for the future of the Catholic Church because sacramental life is part of the core of Catholic identity.

Two main options exist. The first is to increase the number of priests, and the second is to empower other persons. First, *increase the number of priests*. How many do we need? One measure is to look at the number of ordinations each year compared with the number of priests who leave service due to retirement, resignation, or death. Two researchers tried to calculate the ratio, and both concluded that we are getting between 35 and 45 percent of what we need each year to keep the size of the American priesthood constant. And this does not take into account the growth in the American Catholic community. Based on this data, we need at least a doubling of ordinations each year to maintain the sacramental ministry as we have known it.

**W**e could increase our efforts at attracting vocations, but I am skeptical that we can increase seminarians very much. We are *already* trying hard. We could also broaden eligibility for the priesthood. Ideas include optional celibacy, having an honorable discharge after ten or

fifteen years so that a lifelong commitment is not required, and ordination of women. Surveys show that American laity favor these solutions, but they are strongly opposed by the highest church authorities, so they are not available.

**T**here are other options. We already have the "pastoral provision," a special program which allows married Episcopalian priests to become Catholic priests while maintaining their marriages and families. So far only about 100 to 150 of these men have entered in the United States in the last twenty-five years, but the process could be made easier to increase the flow.

Another idea would be to broaden the "pastoral provision," which now applies only to Protestants, to include Catholic priests who have left to get married. There are thousands of them, and some would like to return to active service as married priests.

One other option *is* available now—introducing international priests into the United States. This is being done, and the results are mixed. With international priests there have been widely-reported problems of language and of cultural misunderstandings.

The second main option is to *empower other leaders*. This mainly

means having an increase in professional lay ministers. It is happening rapidly today and it is a hopeful option, even though it does not solve the problem of availability of the Eucharist.

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## THE ABSENCE OF YOUNG ADULTS

Research confirms what many people have observed, that young adults' rates of Mass attendance and group involvement are low. The reform movements in America, such as Call to Action and Voice of the Faithful, also are worried about the absence of young adults in their groups. Where are the young adults? Don't they care about church reforms?

The answer is that young adults haven't had the same personal histories of living in a distinct Catholic community that their parents and grandparents had. Today's young adults, for the most part, live side-by-side with Protestants and members of many other religions. They go to school with them, and they marry each other. The result is a weakening of specific Catholic identity and commitment.

The interfaith marriage rate is now somewhere above 45 percent. The percentage of college-going Catholics who attend Catholic col-

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leges and universities is only about 9 percent. In political races, it has become uninteresting to Americans whether candidates are Catholic or non-Catholic.

Now young adults ask, "Why be Catholic?" "Are we distinctive in any important way?" Some young people tell us, "There's not a dime's worth of difference" between Catholics and Protestants, or "There are many ways to God, and all are equally good." The burning questions are about Catholic *distinctiveness* and whether that distinctiveness is meaningful.

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### **WHAT IS CORE?**

In several surveys we asked young Catholics what they think is really *essential* about being Catholic and what is unessential or even optional. The most extensive was a 1997 nationwide survey of Catholics 20 to 39, asking about 19 different aspects of the faith. Rated most essential, in order, were:

1. Belief that God is present in the sacraments.
2. Charitable efforts toward helping the poor.
3. Belief that Christ is really present in the Eucharist.
4. Devotion to Mary the Mother of God.
5. Belief that God is present in a special way in the poor.

Sacraments were seen as essential, since they were ranked first and third. Devotion to the poor was ranked second and fifth. Devotion to Mary the Mother of God was ranked fourth.

**L**owest among the 19 were "The Church's traditional support of the right of workers to unionize," "Belief that only men can be priests," and "Teachings which oppose the death penalty." Catholic young people see these as optional, not at all essential to the faith.

These findings are similar to the findings in three later studies. In every assessment, Catholic young adults reported that sacraments and charity toward the poor were central to their understanding of the essence of Catholicism. Devotion to Mary the Mother of God and creedal beliefs such as Jesus' resurrection were also central. By contrast, other elements came out consistently low: specific moral teachings about the death penalty and abortion, and specific church rules, for example, requiring personal confession or saying that only celibate men could be priests.

Here we have young adults' views of *what really matters* and what is optional. The top of this chart could be called the core, and the bottom, the periphery. Young

adults see the core as precious, whereas other items may be open to re-evaluation.

At Catholic University we recently carried out an experimental study of young adults. We surveyed a sample of 49 local Catholics from 20 to 39 years old—but it was not a random sample.

**T**he questionnaire said, "Here are several elements of Catholicism. Some are old and some are new. Some are central, while others are not. Please tell us if any of them are sources of pride or inspiration to you. Which of these give you pride in being a Catholic today?" They were asked to rate 18 facets of Catholicism which are unique or near-unique, for example, "Catholicism is the oldest Christian religion," "Devotion to Mary the Mother of God," and "Catholics have private confession to a priest." Which are the most inspiring?

1. "Devotion to Mary the Mother of God."
2. "Catholics believe in the Real Presence of the body and blood of Christ."
3. "Offers sacraments every week."
4. "Has a pope who speaks to world leaders, espousing Christian values and ideals."

Here is information to build on. From another angle, we asked "Who are the two most inspiring Catholics in all of Church history?" We didn't know what to expect. For these young adults Mother Teresa and Pope John Paul II were tied for first place. In third place was St. Francis of Assisi. These are the heroes of the faith for them. This kind of research helps us to identify the building blocks of Catholic identity in the next generation.

The role of social science on church topics is a limited one. Its proper task is to provide reliable information to those entrusted with guiding the Church. We believe research studies such as these can help. ●