YouGov surveys reveal widening gulf between Catholics and Church teaching

As the Vatican surveys the opinions of Catholics in dioceses and parishes around the world, three large polls carried out this year by YouGov for the Westminster Faith Debates reveal a profile of British Catholics adrift from Vatican-style Catholicism, and significant disparities between older and younger believers.

If we measure “faithful Catholics” by the criteria of weekly churchgoing, certain belief in God, taking authority from religious sources, and opposition to abortion, same-sex marriage and euthanasia, only 5% of Catholics fit the mould, and only 2% of those under 30.

Only 36% of Catholics surveyed say that they view the Catholic Church as a positive force in society. When those who take a negative view of the Church are asked their reasons, the most popular answers are that it discriminates against women and gay people, because of the child abuse scandals, because it is hypocritical, and because it is too morally conservative.

Catholicism in Britain relatively strong

Compared to many other denominations, including the Church of England, Catholicism remains relatively strong in Britain. Though there has been a slight decline, around 8-10% of the population of Great Britain still describe themselves as “Catholic.” The minority status of Catholics in Britain, plus inward migration of Catholics, have helped boost overall numbers, but the fact remains that when the 2011 Census revealed a fall in the number who call themselves “Christian” from 72% to 59% over a decade, it was Anglican rather than Catholic losses which were responsible.

It is also notable that belief in God remains high amongst Catholics of all ages. Virtually all churchgoing Catholics believe in God, as do 70% of Catholics in total – compared with only 62% of Anglicans and 46% of the general population. Four-fifths of Catholics aged over 60 believe, and two-thirds of Catholics in their 20s, 30s and 40s.

Catholics also report a relatively high level of personal spiritual practice outside of a church context. Asked about what they have done or experienced in the last month, over 40% say that they have prayed, a fifth that they have visited places which feel sacred or holy, the same number that they have taken regular time to be alone and still the mind, and 8% that they have meditated.
Churchgoing in decline
Regular church attendance is a requirement of the Catholic Church. However, our surveys show for the first time that Catholics are now split roughly 50:50 between those who go to church and those who never go or hardly ever attend except for events like weddings and funerals. Younger Catholics are much less likely to be regular churchgoers. Amongst churchgoers aged over 60, nearly 60% retain a pattern of weekly attendance, compared to only around a quarter of churchgoers under 60.

Zero faith in religious leaders
When asked where they look for guidance in living their life and making decisions, over half of Catholics say their own reason, judgement, intuition or feelings, and another fifth say family or friends. Over-60s are twice as likely as under-50s to take authority from religious sources, but official religious sources of authority are unpopular among churchgoers of all ages. The most cited is “tradition and teachings of the Church” (8%), followed by God (7%), the Bible (2%), the religious group to which a person belongs (2%), and religious leaders, local or national (0%).

Waning obedience to Vatican teaching on issues of personal morality
Where this lack of obedience to their leaders really shows amongst Catholics is in relation to issues of personal morality including sex.

The Catholic Church teaches that sex should only take place within the context of a married, heterosexual relationship which remains open to having children (no artificial contraception). However, whilst Catholics remain positive about the institution of the family, their views about what constitutes a family now diverge enormously from the Church’s official teaching.

Marriage has ceased to be an essential element of the family in most Catholic minds, with only a quarter disapproving of unmarried couples raising children. Almost 90% agree that an unmarried couple with children is a family, and two-thirds say that a same-sex couple with children is a family. Only 9% of Catholics say they would feel guilty using contraception.

Contrary to the Church’s strong opposition to abortion, our surveys find only 19% of British Catholics today support a ban on abortion. Support for a ban has declined by generation: a quarter of over 60s support it compared with 14% of under-40s.

The surveys also find that Catholics as a whole are now in favour of allowing same-sex marriage by a small margin (3%). Younger people are more distanced from the Church’s teaching: over half of Catholics under 50 now say “same-sex marriage is right.”

The polls also found that completely contrary to Church teaching a majority of all Catholics (58%) say the law should be changed to support assisted dying in tightly-controlled circumstances.
But Catholics agree with the Church’s emphasis on social justice

There is one area, however, where Catholics remain in line with official teaching: social justice. Combining responses to several questions about their vision of a good society, we find that half of British Catholics are broadly supportive of more left-wing concerns about social welfare and the common good, whilst less than a third support a more right-wing emphasis on welfare reform and individual responsibility. Catholics are more “centre-left” than the general population as a whole. They are closer to the socio-political values of The Guardian or The Mirror than The Telegraph or The Mail. This concern with social justice is more pronounced amongst women, non-churchgoers, and younger Catholics.

Professor Linda Woodhead comments:

“What these findings show is a widening gulf between what the Vatican thinks a Catholic should be, and what Catholics in Great Britain really are. The gap is widest over issues of sex and personal morality and it has been widening down the generations. There is now a major divide in British Catholicism between a minority who obey their leaders and a majority who do not.

This is not a dispute between faithful Catholics and unfaithful ones, but between two groups who read the same scriptures, honour the same tradition, and pray to the same God but come to different conclusions.

The current survey of Catholics issued by Rome may be a tacit acknowledgment that a chasm has opened up between Church and people, but it is hard to see how the problem can be solved by a survey which will not be able to measure opinion accurately, and a Church which says that its teaching on sex and the body is ‘irreformable.’”

Ends

Notes to Editors

The research reported here was funded by two of the UK’s research councils, designed by Linda Woodhead and administered by YouGov. The surveys are available on the Westminster Faith Debates website (www.faithdebates.org.uk/research).

Three separate surveys were carried out in January and June 2013. Two are representative of adults aged 18-plus in Great Britain excluding Northern Ireland, and each was completed by over 4,000 people, including 350 Catholics in the first and 260 in the second. The third was completed by a nationally representative sample of 1,062 Catholics.

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