

[First of a Series]

By FATHER ANDREW GREELEY

The Roman Catholic Church in the United States has been shaken by a major crisis since the end of the Second Vatican Council. For the last 10 years there has been a sharp decline in the loyalty to the Church and in religious devotion among American Catholics. Once the strongest of America's large religious denominations, the Catholic Church is now in such disarray that questions about its survival are being asked even within the Church itself. Having withstood the assaults of anti-Catholic nativism during the immigrant era, the Catholic Church is now being torn apart by internal forces it cannot control.

Ten years ago, the Catholic Church was proud, strong, and confident in the wake of the apparently successful Second Vatican Council. The first Catholic had been elected president, and Pope John had brought international prestige to the papacy. The ecumenical era had begun with a burst of enthusiasm, and many of the divisions which had separated Christians since the Reformation seemed to be vanishing. Since that time, perhaps as many as 5,000 priests have left the priesthood, and the number of nuns has declined by 45,000. Many seminaries and novitiates, in which young people are trained for the priesthood and religious life, have closed; those remaining are often less than half filled.

Enrollment in Catholic schools has declined by more than a half million students. When the Mass was in Latin more than 70 per cent of American Catholics went to church every week; now it is in English and church attendance has declined to less than 50 per cent.

When the Church was stern and strict, less than 7 per cent of those who were born Catholic ever left it; now that it has become much more liberal, the proportion of those leaving the Church has doubled. Only about 15 per cent of the Catholic laity continue to accept the Church's teaching on birth control.

Two studies done by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), in 1963 and 1974, to measure the impact of Catholic education, make it possible to pinpoint the changes that have occurred and to analyze the role of the Catholic schools in a deteriorating church.

The surveys were both national probability samples conducted through personal interviews by NORC's trained staff of national interviewers. There were more than 2,000 respondents in the first survey, slightly more than 1,000 in the second. In both studies the response rate was ap-

EDITOR'S NOTE: A special series, *The Crisis in American Catholicism*, begins this week. Written by Father Andrew Greeley, director of the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), the series is based on survey findings used for the recently published and controversial book, *Catholic Schools in a Declining Church*. The book has been criticized by Archbishop Joseph Bernardin, president of the U.S. Catholic Conference, who has warned that "Catholic truth is not determined by sociological data or analyses." The series will be the center of much discussion and the *Courier-Journal* offers it to keep our readers aware of current issues within the Church.

proximately 80 per cent (considered standard in national surveys). The interviews lasted over an hour, and the most modern methods of quality control were used to check the accuracy of responses. The two NORC studies constitute the only "trend analysis" data ever collected on a large national religious denomination.

The differences in response to identical questions in the two surveys is striking. The proportion praying every day has declined from 72 per cent in 1963 to 60 per cent in 1974. The proportion going to confession every month has dropped from 37 per cent to 17. The proportion with a high score on an index to measure Catholic activism has declined from 45 per cent to 31.

The proportion who would be "very pleased" if their son became a priest has declined from 66 per cent to 50. The proportion giving more than 2.3 per cent of their income to the Church every year has declined from 41 per cent to 19. The proportion saying the Church has the right to teach on racial integration has declined from 49 to 37 per cent, and the proportion saying that it was "certainly true" that Jesus handed over the leadership of his Church to Peter and the popes directly declined from 70 per cent to 42. Only 37 per cent are convinced of papal infallibility. A majority reject the Church's teaching on divorce, and only 15 per cent agree with its teaching on birth control.

Furthermore, the proportion of those who were born Catholic but no longer consider themselves Catholic has increased sharply in the last eight years (between 1955 and 1967 there was no change). Apostasy rates have gone from 11 to 22 per cent for those under 30, from 8 to 13 per cent

for those between thirty and 50, and from 5 to 11 per cent for those over 50 — a doubling at each age level. Among people under 30 who attended college, almost one third have left the Church.

How can this extraordinary and totally unexpected crisis in American Catholicism be explained? Three different explanations are frequently offered: educational, generational, and conciliar.

Since the end of the second World War, the educational level of American Catholics has substantially increased, so that on the average only Episcopalians and Presbyterians among Christian groups are better educated.

Irish Catholics under 40 are second only to Jews in their educational attainment. Such a social change, it is argued, would have made for more questioning of Catholic orthodoxy whether there had been a Vatican Council or not.

Furthermore, there is a new generation that has grown up since 1963. It lived through the crises of the Vietnam war and Watergate. Such a generation is skeptical of all authority, political or religious. Perhaps much of the decline in Catholic orthodoxy can be explained by the influx of this very large (one third of adult Catholics are under 30) new generation.

Finally, the Vatican Council, however well intentioned, caused Catholics to question some of their age-old religious practices — like not eating meat on Friday. Once one part of the tight structure of Catholic belief can be questioned, the whole structure can collapse.

But none of these explanations seems to work. There is no relationship among American Catholics between education and religious devotion and practice. A decade ago, the better educated were a little more orthodox than the rest of the population; today there is virtually no difference. Furthermore, 80 per cent of the change that has occurred among American Catholics has taken place in those over 30, and only about one fifth of the change can be explained by the influx of a less religious younger generation.

Neither of the standard explanations of education and demography, which are used to account for so many American social changes, seems to have much responsibility for what has happened. As we shall see in the next release, neither can the change be attributed to the Second Vatican Council.

NEXT WEEK: The disastrous effects of the birth control encyclical.



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