

Poll results speak loud and clear

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

While the U.S. Catholic bishops met at the University of Notre Dame last month for their annual spring, the results of a new Gallup survey of Catholic opinion were announced at a press conference.

When polling results run counter to one's interests, the results are usually discounted or explained away.

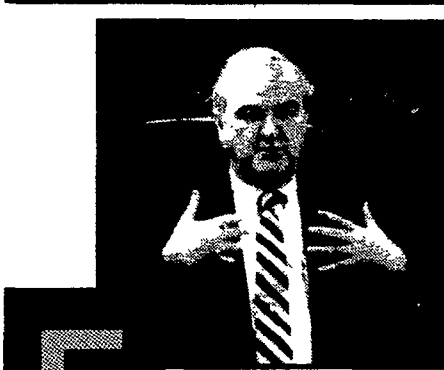
Polls are not definitive; they sometimes yield ambiguous results. And they are never determinative of truth or morality. One can readily concede those points.

But polls do tell us what people are thinking at a given time, and they also reveal trends and shifts in public opinion. This latest Gallup poll is important for at least three reasons.

First, it provides additional scientific evidence — as opposed to anecdotal evidence and wishful thinking — for the common belief that the great majority of U.S. Catholics disagrees with many of the bishops and with the Vatican on the most highly publicized issues in today's church.

Secondly, it shows that the level of disagreement is growing, not leveling off, and that support for change is especially evident among Catholics under 35.

Thirdly, the poll confirms the



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view that ultra-conservative Catholics constitute only a small segment of the U.S. Catholic community.

Taking the three points in order:

1. The results indicate that 75 percent of U.S. Catholics supports the end of obligatory celibacy for priests; 70 percent favors allowing currently active priests to marry and to continue to function as priests; and 51 percent thinks it would help the church to invite priests who have married to become active parish priests again.

On the role of women: 67 percent favors the ordination of women to the priesthood; 80 percent favors women deacons; 87 percent favors

altar girls; and more than half even favors women bishops.

Regarding sexual and marital morality: 87 percent believes that the church should end its ban on artificial birth control; 74 percent believes that divorced Catholics who have remarried without an annulment should be permitted to receive communion; and 83 percent believes that the bishops should approve the use of condoms to prevent the spread of AIDS.

A few bishops have singled out Catholic Democratic politicians for public criticism. When asked if Catholics can in good conscience vote for pro-choice candidates, however, 69.7 percent said yes.

Eighty-one percent also believes that one can be a good Catholic and publicly disagree with an official church teaching.

2. The movement of public opinion in the Catholic Church continues to move away from official teachings and policies. Support for the ordination of women, for example, has risen from 29 percent in 1974, to 47 percent in 1985, and to 67 percent today.

In 1971, 49 percent of U.S. Catholics favored allowing priests to marry and to continue functioning as priests. In 1983, support for a married clergy rose to 58 percent. In this latest survey it has yet again increased to 70 percent.

The greatest support for reform

comes from younger Catholics under 35, which means that the trend is more likely to intensify in the years to come, rather than level off or decline.

3. Regarding the numerical strength of the ultra-conservative wing of the U.S. Catholic Church: Only 6.2 percent, for example, strongly disagrees with a lifting of the ban on birth control; only 7.3 percent strongly believes that it's not possible to be a good Catholic and publicly disagree with church teaching; only 14.2 percent strongly denies that a Catholic can in good conscience vote for a pro-choice candidate; 19.6 percent strongly opposes the ordination of women; and 10 percent opposes altar girls.

Again, polls don't determine truth, or right and wrong. But they do tell us what people are thinking.

Whether one is prepared to admit it or not, change-oriented Catholics constitute the mainstream of the U.S. Catholic Church, while those on the right who are adamantly opposed to renewal and reform represent 10 percent or less of the total U.S. Catholic population.

That ought to be kept in mind when their angry letters of complaint cross the desk of a bishop or pastor.

In the end, how one responds to all this data is a matter of pastoral prudence, but dismissing the data out of hand is not.

Pray not to change God, but to be changed

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 11:1-13; (R1) Genesis 18:20-32; (R2) Colossians 2:12-14.

St. Luke emphasizes three things about Jesus in his Gospel: His concern for women; the universality of salvation; and prayer.

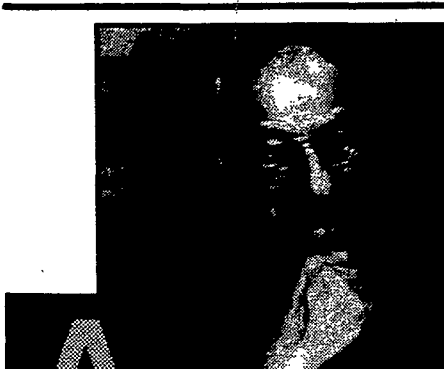
Luke noted, "One day Jesus was praying." His prayer must have had such an effect on Jesus Himself, even exteriorly, that the disciples asked Him to teach them to pray. Imagine! Although Jews prayed seven times a day, they asked Him, "Lord, teach us to pray."

So He taught them the "Our Father."

Jesus taught us to pray for everybody through this prayer. Somebody said, "We are all in the 'Our Father' because 'I' and 'you' are not in it." For Jesus had said, "When you pray, say, 'our,' 'us,' and 'we.'"

St. John Damascene defined prayer as "the petition of fitting things from God."

St. Luke has five petitions in the "Our Father;" St. Matthew has seven petitions: three for God's glory, one for our bodily needs, and



A WORD FOR SUNDAY

three for our soul.

In the newest revision proposed by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL), two changes are being proposed in the "Our Father."

The first is to avoid the archaic English "who art" and "thy;" and the second is to change "Lead us not into temptation" to "Save us from the time of trial."

Our Lady at Medjugorje spent three weeks teaching the youth

prayer group there to pray the "Our Father." St. Teresa of Avila wrote a commentary on it, as did St. Augustine and St. Cyprian.

The key to praying well is confidence and persistence. We can pray with confidence, for prayer is addressed to our Father.

And we ought to pray with persistence, because persistence is proof of our earnestness and sincerity.

Abraham persisted in his prayer to God for Sodom. Six times he asked God to spare the city. He asked, God answered. He sought, and found God merciful. He knocked, and God was open to all his requests. Abraham surmised that at least 10 good men could be found in Lot's household. Only then did he desist.

Jesus illustrated the need to persevere in prayer with the parable of the man who by sheer persistence got his friend out of bed in the middle of the night just to get some bread.

The constancy of the dropping water wearth a hole in the rock. Nothing is so fragile as a drop of water; nothing so resistant as a rock. Yet water can burrow through

even a rock by hitting it constantly.

God is no rock. He is our Father. He is not deaf to our needs. Jesus told us, "If a son asks his father for a fish, would he give him a snake; or for an egg, would he give him a scorpion? If you who are so evil give good things to your children, how much more will your Father in Heaven?"

If God is so disposed to give us good things, why do we have to ask Him? God gives us countless good things without our asking: the sun, rain, plants and animals; as well as our life, our faith, our families.

Yet there are certain things God wants us to ask from Him so He can help us get to know ourselves. One of our greatest dangers is to declare our independence from God.

Were everything given to us, man — proud-bent as he is — would soon think himself lord and master of all things, self-sufficient, needing no one but himself.

And He wants us to pray persistently, not to batter down the resistance of a reluctant God, but to open us up to His answer to our prayers.

We pray not to change God, but to be changed.

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