

Church searches for means to increase donations

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A number of studies indicate that U.S. Catholics give a smaller percentage of their incomes to their churches than do members of other religious groups. Although the figures vary, the statistics presented in *Catholic Contributions: Sociology and Policy*, a 1986 book by Father Andrew Greeley and Bishop William McManus, are among the most commonly cited.

According to the book, Catholics contribute approximately 1.1 percent of their income to their church, whereas Protestants donate 2.2 percent of their incomes.

Ironically, studies also indicate that Catholics are among the most affluent religious groups in the United States.

Some Catholics are giving more than the statistics indicate, noted Father Francis Novak, C.S.R., president of the Chicago-based National Catholic Conference for Total Stewardship.

"I think that donations are in fact up — from the ones who give," Father Novak told the *Courier*. "Whereas the numbers who are giving are growing less and less. That's the problem."

Father Novak estimated that about 21 percent of Catholics are providing support for the church, while the other 79 percent are not contributing.

Those figures parallel the standard estimates for both Catholic and Protestant churches, noted Dean Hoge, a professor of sociology at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

"Giving is highly skewed," Hoge told the *Courier*. Sociologists studying giving patterns among Catholics and Protestants have found that, as a rule, only 20 to 25 percent of a congregation will contribute money, he explained.

Tom D'Agostino, director of the Thanks Giving Appeal, reported that a number of pastors have told him they are aware of this split in their own parishes.

"Pastors told me in a parish of 2,000,



you may see 600 envelopes on Sunday," D'Agostino said.

In terms of the TGA, D'Agostino continued, of approximately 150,000 Catholic households in the diocese, only a little more than a third contribute. As of June 17, he noted, the diocese had received pledges from 56,565 donors for the 1992-93 TGA — which officially ends June 30.

Why more people are not giving to the church remains unclear, but Hoge is hoping to shed some light on those reasons.

Thanks to a \$627,772 grant from the Lilly Endowment, the Catholic University sociologist is conducting a study of giving among five denominations, including Catholics.

Hoge noted that previous research had concentrated on the amounts people gave, but not on what encourages or discourages them from giving. He hopes that his study — which will be completed in 1994 or 1995 — will help to reveal those reasons.

From preliminary research of studies already done, however, Hoge was able to cite some of the possible reasons.

Among them, Hoge said, are dissatisfaction with church leaders and teachings, and the size of a church congregation.

Although the effects of these and other factors are unclear, at least one group of factors seems to directly correlate to giving, Hoge observed.

"The personal factors are number one," Hoge said.

Those "personal factors" include involvement in church activities and a sense of being included in governing and financial decisions, Hoge said. But, he added, "the strongest predictor of giving is church attendance rate."

Seeberg expressed a similar view, though from a more developmental perspective.

He noted that the four main reasons for people to give to a church — in order of importance — are involvement in governance; how the church responds to needs; how well the church manages its money; and the church's leadership.

Seeberg proposed that some pastors seem not to be aware of these motivating factors for contemporary Catholics. He suggested that individuals are saying, "I'm not willing to part with my money just because a guy with a white collar tells me to. I want to know how the money is going to be spent."

Thus, in order to get people to give more, pastors have to be open to lay involvement and accountability, Seeberg acknowledged.

All too often, Seeberg continued, giving is crisis-driven. The parish faces a shortfall and puts out an appeal. That may resolve the immediate problem, he said, but does nothing to address future needs. And even when parishes conduct stewardship or extra giving campaigns, the increases are often short-term, he observed.

An additional problem, Seeberg said, is that many Catholics have not changed the giving habits they learned from their less affluent parents.

"You get Catholics who are sophisticated in the marketplace, but somehow when they go to the parish, it's 1942 again," Seeberg said. "They toss a dol-

lar into the plate like their fathers did, but will write a check to Notre Dame (University) for a \$1,000."

Seeberg suggested that part of what parishes have to do is to ask more of people who are able to give more.

Father Novak argues, however, that the problem is not just one of habit, or one that can be addressed through development and giving campaigns.

"It's a crisis of faith," Father Novak declared. "We have to address the faith problem, and the money problem will be resolved."

In their pastoral letter, the U.S. bishops correctly focus on the idea that giving is a part of discipleship, Father Novak noted. Indeed, the pastoral has come under attack because it focuses on theology, but provides few practical suggestions.

Father Novak acknowledged that the pastoral is weak, but that it "lays down some good principles."

When we're talking about stewardship, we're not talking about fund raising," Father Novak continued. "We're talking about celebrating your life as a Christian."

One of Father Novak's suggestions was for pastors to gather small groups of lay leaders to help evangelize others and promote greater involvement in the parishes. This will produce a ripple effect.

"People are going to jump on the bandwagon, and the collection will go up," Father Novak predicted.

Cluster's effort lifts collections

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This particular program consists of a series of letters written to parishioners requesting that they commit to increasing their weekly contributions.

Marilyn Paradise, the cluster's secretary for special projects, said the program appealed to the cluster's staff because of its personal approach.

"We thought it was pretty non-threatening, on a private level," Paradise said.

Paradise said the program was especially effective at this time because of the diocese's current Synod. "I think the people realized that we need to look at the future of the church," she remarked.

The program has succeeded in increasing the combined weekly collection of the parishes from approximately \$1,600 to the \$2,400 to \$2,700 range, Father Ryan reported.

But to keep giving in that range, the cluster's staff will have to continue its efforts, Father Ryan acknowledged.

"You can't just give a campaign, then do nothing and three years later have to do a whole new campaign," Father Ryan observed.

"The key is, the people need to know what is the amount of money that is coming in, and how it is being spent," Father Ryan continued. "A couple of times a year, you have to give a progress report."

Further, the parishes will have to remind people annually about giving to maintain or increase the collection level.

The goal beyond increased collections, Father Ryan concluded, is to "gradually educate people in the spiritual side of giving."

— Lee Strong

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Authors

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For Catholic readers the final 20 pages, "Recent Currents in American Catholicism," are perhaps the most riveting. Herein the authors test their thesis in view of some of the changes that began just before the Second Vatican Council (such as the decline in the number of religious vocations) and those that followed Vatican II (such as in the liturgy, ecumenism, the laity's empowerment, and others).

Their conclusion? "We think it unlikely that the American Catholic Church will be able to halt its transformation from an energetic sect into a sedate mainline body." And, ominously, "mainline bodies are always headed for the sideline."

Although this book may serve well as a discussion-starter, for it is chal-

lenging and provocative, and although it is eminently reader-friendly, with its glossy paper, impressive bibliography, endnotes, index, and excellent selection of 47 illustrations and charts that would make Ross Perot envious, it has a significant flaw: the book lacks any awareness of the Holy Spirit's operation in the world.

Because the book is also based on the analogy of business and the strictures of business competition ("What is good for General Motors is good for religion too?"), it is heavy with the marketplace's jargon.

These two authors, who sought to "explain the churching of America — how it went from a nation in which most people did not belong to a church to one in which most people do," protest that they "have omitted nothing that would modify any of our conclusions."

To that, Martin E. Marty, the distinguished Protestant historian of religion, has responded: "Finke and Stark's world contains no God or religion or spirituality, no issue of truth or beauty or goodness, no faith or hope or love, no justice or mercy; only winning and losing in the churching game matters." Well said.

McManus, a professor emeritus of English, lives in Venice, Fla.

Correction

Last week's page one article, "Clusters Grow as Priest Availability Falls," contained an error. Father David W. Mura currently serves as pastor of Rochester's Holy Apostles Church, 530 Lyell Ave. He was appointed in January. We regret the error.