

New poll on attitudes

Reveals Catholics more independent

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (CNS) — U.S. Catholics view adherence to official church teachings more loosely today than they did six years ago, according to a national poll published Oct. 8 in the *National Catholic Reporter*.

The poll said Catholics in 1993 also show more interest in lay involvement in church decisions and more flexibility about possible adaptations of their parish and personal life to a shortage of priests.

It showed Mass attendance holding steady but commitment to the church decreasing slightly in two other areas: how important people said the church was to them and how likely they thought they were to remain Catholic or to leave the church.

The NCR-Gallup Poll, a telephone survey of 802 Catholics, was conducted in May and has an accuracy rate of plus or minus 4 percent. A follow-up to an NCR-Gallup Poll study of Catholics in May 1987, it repeated the questions of the 1987 poll and added several new ones.

One of the major findings was a substantial increase in the percentage of respondents who said a person can remain a good Catholic without adhering to certain beliefs or practices traditionally associated with being a Catholic.

The percentage that said one can be a good Catholic without obeying church teaching on abortion rose from 39 percent in 1987 to 56 percent in 1993; without being married in the church, from 51 to 61 percent; without obeying church teaching on birth control, from 66 to 73 percent; without believing the pope is infallible, from 45 to 50 percent.

When they were asked who should have the final say on key moral issues — church leaders, the individual, or both working together — one-fourth or fewer placed the final say with church leaders alone.

On every issue raised, larger percentages thought the final decision should be made collaboratively rather than by church leaders alone, but still larger percentages thought the final decision should rest with the individual.

On the question of sexual relations outside of marriage, those who thought church leaders should have the final say dropped from 34 percent in 1987 to 23 percent in 1993; on homosexual behavior, from 32 percent in 1987 to 26 percent in 1993; on abortion,

from 29 percent six years ago to 21 percent this year.

The poll showed continued growth in the support of Catholics for married priests and for women priests. According to the 1993 poll, 72 percent thought it would be a good idea to ordain married men and 64 percent thought it would be good to ordain women.

In a series of six questions about what changes in parish life would be acceptable or unacceptable as the number of priests drops, across the board Catholics showed more openness to such changes this year than they did six years ago.

The number that considered less than one Mass a week acceptable in their home parish rose from 28 percent to 41 percent.

More than half said they now consider it acceptable to have their parish run by a lay administrator and to rely completely on deacons or lay officials for marriages and baptisms.

Less than half said they could accept not having a priest around to visit the sick or give last sacraments to the dying, but even the idea of being without a priest has gained greater acceptance over the last six years.

In 1987 only 24 percent said they could accept having no priest to visit the sick, but this year 41 percent found that acceptable. In 1987 only 15 percent could countenance having no priest around for last rites, but this year 29 percent said that would be acceptable.

One question asked for the first time concerned the effect of reports about priests who sexually abuse children. Half the Catholics surveyed said such news weakens their commitment to the church. Only 4 percent said it made their commitment stronger.

The poll found reports of priestly pedophilia to be one of the most serious threats to people's sense of commitment to the church today.

Close behind among the problem areas surveyed were reports of homosexuality among priests. Thirty-five percent of the respondents said that weakened their commitment, 4 percent said it strengthened their commitment, and the rest said it had no effect or they were unsure.

The church's teaching on birth control weakened the commitment of 33 percent of the respondents and strengthened that of 12 percent. Not ordaining women weakened the commitment of 25 percent and strengthened that of 15 percent.

Mass for peace



AP/Wide World Photos

Muslims, Serbs, Croats pray

Vatican envoy Roger Etchegaray (left) of France, gives communion to a Bosnian Croat soldier during a Mass for peace at Sarajevo's Roman Catholic Cathedral Oct. 3. Three days of joint prayers for peace by Sarajevo's Muslims, Orthodox Serbs and Roman Catholic Croats ended on a sour note when Bosnia's chief imam failed to show up at the service.

Ex-priest pleads guilty to sodomy

NEW BEDFORD, Mass. (CNS) — James A. Porter, a former Catholic priest, pleaded guilty Oct. 4 to molesting more than 30 children in the early 1960s in three different Massachusetts parishes.

In Superior Court in New Bedford, he pleaded guilty to more than 40 counts of sodomy, indecent assault and child molestation. He is due to be sentenced Dec. 6.

Porter, 58, was indicted in September 1992 after dozens of his victims came forward to complain about the abuse they said he inflicted on them during the 1960s.

The court clerk took over 20 minutes to read the list of indictments to a hushed courtroom, where some of Porter's victims and their relatives were moved to tears.

Porter, who left the priesthood in 1974, was charged with abusing 36 children — boys and girls — while he was a parish priest in North Attleboro, Fall River and New Bedford between 1960 and 1968.

Among his victims was a former al-

tar boy, Frank Fitzpatrick, who is now a private detective and who began searching for Porter in 1989.

Porter's case has been called the worst ever of pedophilia by a member of the clergy in the United States.

It gained national and international attention last year when Porter admitted in a television interview that he had molested nearly 100 children all over the country during his time as a parish priest in Massachusetts, New Mexico, Minnesota and Nevada.

He admitted that he was a "very sick man" but hoped to block the charges by arguing they were outdated. However, those attempts were rejected by Massachusetts courts.

Last December a Minnesota jury found him guilty of molesting his children's babysitter in the 1980s and sentenced him to six months in prison. He is now on probation after completing that jail sentence.

Just a week before that verdict the Diocese of Fall River, Mass., announced it had reached a financial settlement with 68 people who said they were sexually abused by Porter.

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