

# HEALTH

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## Should church speak up on weight issues?



Story by  
Mike Latona

Linda Joanne Rivers

**F**ranks discussion of body weight can be a sensitive issue. But it's also a subject that many denominations, including the Catholic Church, should be more vocal about.

That's the opinion of Kenneth Ferraro, sociology professor at Purdue University, who conducted a study exploring the relationship between body weight and religion. He reported his findings in the March 1998 *Review of Religious Research*, in an article titled "Firm Believers? Religion, Body Weight and Well-Being."

"The present study finds no evidence of religion operating to constrain body weight," Ferraro wrote. "While religious institutions may eventually be vehicles for public health campaigns against excessive body weight, the findings from this investigation suggest that religious institutions are not likely to become a major avenue of intervention in the immediate future."

The study examined a 1993 report of information collected from public records in all 50 states by the MicroCase Corporation, and a 1990 survey of 3,617 adults by the National Institute on Aging. Ferraro's conclusions were based on surveyed people's height and weight, as well as their answers to questions concerning attendance level at religious events and the importance of religion in their daily lives.

Ferraro asserted that people who are more active in practicing their religion are also more likely to be overweight. Not only is American religion silent about body weight, he explained, but also it promotes "the goal of social acceptance of parishioners in a religious community."

Father David Faraone, who has struggled with excessive weight since kindergarten, said that while he was growing up in the Catholic Church he found this acceptance to be a good thing.

"I was surrounded by priests, sisters and faith communities who loved me for who I was. They gave me an opportunity to become whole. That played into my wanting to become a priest," said Father Faraone, 42, pastor at Church of the Epiphany/St. Rose of Lima churches in Sodus and Sodus Point.

Yet Ferraro — noting that excessive weight is associated with heart disease, hypertension and diabetes — feels that the church's acceptance of overweight people

should be accompanied by a plea for them to take better care of themselves.

"This issue has always been off to the side. Maybe it's time to put it out there," the professor said in a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*. "This is a big problem in America. All you have to do is look at how the weight-loss industry has grown."

Indeed, the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute released a report last month stating that 97 million American adults — 55 percent of the adult population — are affected by at least some amount of excessive weight. The report also said that those who fall into the category of obese — or significantly overweight — rose from nearly 13 percent to 22.5 percent of the U.S. population between 1960 and 1994.

In addition, the institute's June report released tighter guidelines on what is considered overweight by using a height-weight measurement known as BMI (body-mass index). With this model, 29 million Americans were added into the "overweight" category.

Ferraro remarked that his own findings were rather ironic because religious leaders often denounce the potential health risks of alcohol, drug dependency and promiscuous sexual behavior — but do not devote similar emphasis toward excessive weight.

"Being obese is not a big sin in most churches," Ferraro said.

However, Ferraro said that the issue does seem to be gaining attention on a national level. For instance, Weigh Down, a national organization which describes itself as a "Christian-based weight loss program," offers a series of videos, workshops, books, audiotapes and Bible lessons for overweight people.

Weigh Down's Web-page overview claims it can show "how our God can transform ... hearts and minds so that they can rise above the magnetic pull of the refrigerator." Weigh Down promotes replacing hunger "with the will of God" so that overweight people will instead be "hungering and thirsting after righteousness."

Ferraro added that both Catholic and non-Catholic faiths appear to be offering more church-based programs to address excessive weight. Yet Father Faraone said he's not aware of any parish program in the Diocese of Rochester that has addressed the topic. He did acknowledge that he has attended meetings of Overeaters Anonymous — an organization for people with compulsive eating disorders — that have been hosted at Catholic parishes.

Ferraro admitted that broaching the subject of excessive weight is easier said than done.

"The question is how to bring this up but not offend the people," he said.

Father Faraone said that although it's important for the church to offer programs and information, many overweight people are sensitive to taking unsolicited advice about a problem they're well aware of.

"I think there's a presumption that overweight people are not doing anything about it. What angers me is the person who makes the quick judgment," said Father Faraone, who noted that he diets, swims, plays racquetball and takes long walks.

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ROCHESTER INDIVIDUAL PRACTICE ASSOCIATION, INC.

2000 Winton Road South  
Building 1, Suite 201 • Rochester, NY 14618  
242-0610

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