

Bishops' survey looks at U.S. Catholics' views on marriage

WASHINGTON - Although nearly three-quarters of American Catholics say they are somewhat or very familiar with church teachings on marriage, many mistakenly believe that a non-Catholic spouse must promise to raise the couple's children as Catholic and that church teaching accepts divorce in cases of marital infidelity.

Those were among the results of a nationwide survey commissioned in April 2007 by the U.S. bishops' Committee on Marriage and Family Life on U.S. Catholic attitudes and practices regarding marriage. The survey was carried out in June 2007 by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University via the Internet polling firm Knowledge Networks and was made public Feb. 11.

"This is the first time that such a varied and comprehensive body of data about Catholic patterns in marriage has been collected and analyzed," said Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz of Louisville, Ky. He is chairman of what is now the bishops' Subcommittee on Marriage and Family Life of the newly renamed Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth.

"The study establishes a needed base line of demographic information about the marital status and related characteristics of adult Catholics across a generational timeline," he added in a statement released with the 250-page survey report.

The margin of error for the survey of 1,008 self-identified Catholics 18 or older was plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.

The report said marriage patterns among U.S. Catholics were similar to those for all Americans, with 53 percent of Catholics married, 25 percent never married, 12 percent divorced, 5 percent widowed, 4 percent living with a partner and 1 percent separated. Including those who have remarried, 23 percent of American Catholics have been divorced at some time.

Among those currently married, nearly a third (30 percent) had not been married in the church or had their marriage "convalidated," or formally blessed by the church.

For those who were separated or divorced at the time of the survey, more than half (51 percent) said they had not been married in the church or had their marriage convalidated.

Of those who were divorced, 85 percent had not sought an annulment and another 8 percent had asked for an annulment but it was not granted. An annulment had been granted to only 7 percent of the divorced Catholics surveyed.

Asked whether they had heard a variety of statements presented as a teaching of the Catholic Church on marriage, a majority of all respondents said they had heard that marriage between two baptized persons is a sacrament, that openness to children is essential to marriage, that the church does not consider a second marriage after civil divorce to be valid and that marriage is good for the community as well as for the individual couple.

But nearly six in 10 (59 percent) also had heard that a non-Catholic spouse must promise that the couple's children will be raised Catholic, an inaccurate statement; 80 percent of those who had heard the statement believed it to be accurate.

Similar percentages of those who had heard that a marriage between a Catholic and a non-Christian is a sacrament and that church teaching "is accepting of divorce in cases of marital infidelity" believed that those false statements were true church teachings.

Asked for their views on the general acceptability of divorce, more than three-quarters of U.S. Catholics (76 percent) said it was "acceptable in some cases" and another 17 percent said it was "acceptable in all cases." Only 7 percent said divorce was "not acceptable in any case."

When they were asked about whether divorce was acceptable in specific circumstances, 96 percent said it was in cases of physical abuse, 92 percent said yes when there was emotional abuse and 85 percent said it was acceptable when there was infidelity.

The survey report divided respondents into four generational groups: the pre-Second Vatican Council generation, ages 65 and over in 2007, who made up 19 percent of

the respondents; the Vatican II generation, ages 47-64, 31 percent; the post-Vatican II generation, ages 26-46, 40 percent; and the millennial generation, ages 18-25, 10 percent.

“Agreement with church teachings is ... often relatively high among the oldest Catholics. ... To a lesser extent this is also true of the millennial generation,” the report said. “Agreement with church teaching is sometimes lowest among the generation of Catholics who came of age during the changes associated with Vatican II and among post-Vatican II-generation Catholics.”

The report also found that frequency of Mass attendance served as “a strong indicator of the general importance of Catholicism in a person’s life and his or her level of commitment to living out the faith.”

“Those who attend Mass every week are six times as likely as those who rarely or never attend to report that their view of marriage has been ‘very’ informed by their Catholic faith,” the report said. “They are also more than two and a half times as likely to describe themselves as ‘very’ familiar with church teaching on marriage.”

The survey also explored such topics as what kind of marriage preparation couples received and how valuable they found it, whether couples contemplating divorce requested or received assistance from anyone in the church, what kind of information couples would like to receive about marriage and its challenges, and what values they think help sustain a marriage.

“Not surprisingly, the study paints a mixed picture,” Archbishop Kurtz said. “It gives us reasons to be grateful and hopeful. It also raises concerns and presents us with challenges.”

Although many couples find value in marriage preparation courses, “it is sobering to note that relatively few Catholics seem willing to seek church-sponsored help for difficulties once they are married,” he added. “We must find ways to offer couples a more integrated, continuous and varied ministry that will help them grow in happiness and holiness through the entire life cycle of a marriage.”

The archbishop also expressed concern that 41 percent of younger Catholics were

choosing to marry outside the church and that “more than half of unmarried young Catholic adults do not consider it important to be married in the church.”

“These data may indicate an increasing number of Catholics who are unlikely to experience the full value and graces of the sacrament in the future,” he said.

The survey was commissioned as part of the bishops’ National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage, which the bishops launched in 2004 to call attention to the value of married life.