

Catholics urge more focus on social justice, new national survey shows

By Patricia Zapor

Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON - A large national study on faith and political views released Oct. 23 highlighted Catholics' interest in having social justice take a bigger role in the church's policy priorities.

The American Values Survey by Public Religion Research Institute queried a cross section of all Americans but zeroed in on the opinions of Catholics, in particular, on topics including contraceptive coverage in insurance and the death penalty as well as on the pending presidential election.

In interviews during September, a majority of Catholics told pollsters that they would prefer it if the church would focus its public policy statements "more on social justice and the obligation to help the poor, even if it means focusing less on issues like abortion and the right to life."

Sixty percent of Catholics concurred with that statement or with another version in which the phrasing was reversed.

Among those Catholics who attend church at least weekly, 51 percent chose the social justice emphasis, while 65 percent of those who attend monthly or less often made that choice. Among the various demographic breakouts provided by the study, just two segments — self-identified conservatives and Republicans — agreed with the statement by less than 50 percent, 46 percent and 47 percent, respectively, though that was still the plurality response.

Social justice was chosen by slightly more poll participants who self-identified as conservative and Republican than selected the opposite. For instance, 44 percent of self-identified conservatives chose: "should focus more on issues like abortion and the right to life, even if it means focusing less on social justice and the obligation to

help the poor,” or its parallel wording. Ten percent of conservatives answered “neither” or said they “didn’t know.”

Michele Dillon, a professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire who specializes in research on religion and culture, said the response reflects a long-term pattern in Catholic thinking, despite what she considered a drawback in the question forcing a choice between just two concepts.

She said previous open-ended polling elicited similar priorities.

“Care for the poor and needy has been a strong theme in Catholic teaching since the end of the 19th century,” Dillon told Catholic News Service in an Oct. 25 phone interview. “That’s been totally in continuity with the church leadership over the decades and it’s still primary for a lot of people in defining what it means to be Catholic.”

“It’s right up there with belief in the Resurrection with what people say it means to be Catholic,” she said.

Coincidentally, two items on the agenda for the annual fall general meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops are a proposed document on preaching that emphasizes the need to connect homilies with people’s lives, and a message on the economy, “Catholic Reflections on Work, Poverty and a Broken Economy.”

There’s a pretty good link between the polling data and the two documents, in the mind of one theologian who advises the bishops.

“Spiritually, people are thirsting for the message of the Gospel and to find hope in the midst of economic suffering,” said Meghan Clark, an assistant professor of theology and religious studies in moral theology at St. John’s University in Queens, New York, and a consultant to the USCCB Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development.

In an Oct. 25 interview with CNS and a related exchange of emails, she said that people may feel they hear enough about abortion and related topics because, “many priests are comfortable delivering a counter-cultural message on life issues because they are perceived as black/white issues.”

The survey suggests that Catholics “want them to issue the same challenge on social justice issues, which are at the heart of the Gospel,” Clark added. “It isn’t primarily about politics, but about communicating the challenge of the Gospel — that discipleship requires concern for the ‘least’ and dismantling structures of sin.”

Clark, who teaches moral theology, said “frequently the only thing my non-Catholic students know about the faith is the teaching on abortion.” The Catechism of the Catholic Church says abortion is “gravely contrary to the moral law” in all cases.

“There’s no doubt, no confusion about what the church teaches on abortion,” she said. But the social teachings are less well understood, she added.

She said she wasn’t surprised that even the most regular churchgoers also want to hear more about social justice.

“People want to live integrated lives, to follow the Gospel, to have integrity in what they do Sunday and every day,” Clark said.

Clark said the bishops’ decision to write a reflection on the economy came out of concern that people are suffering from poverty, unemployment, underemployment and other financial difficulties. Like most documents of the bishops’ conference it is a product of months of effort.

The American Values Survey was based on interviews with 3,003 adults phoned between Sept. 13 and 20. The margin of error for the total survey is plus or minus 2 percentage points. No margin of error was given for the subset of Catholics in the study.

Editor’s Note: A CNS video story about the survey can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=No2X2CW5IGs&noredirect=1.

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