

Church's relationship with younger adults is problematic

WASHINGTON – The U.S. Catholic Church's relationship with younger adults is problematic, says a newly published study by four leading sociologists of religion.

In one recent survey "just over half of American Catholics said that young adults' lack of participation in the church is a serious problem," the 205-page book says. That concern was reflected not just by older Catholics, but even by nearly half of the younger adult Catholics surveyed, it says.

The new book is titled "American Catholics Today: New Realities of Their Faith and Their Church." It was co-authored by William V. D'Antonio, James D. Davidson, Dean R. Hoge and Mary L. Gautier.

D'Antonio and Hoge are fellows of the Life Cycle Institute of The Catholic University of America, Davidson teaches sociology at Purdue University and Gautier is a senior research associate at the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University.

Reporting mainly on a 2005 telephone survey of nearly 900 Catholics by the Gallup Organization, the study compares results of that survey with similar surveys taken in 1987, 1993 and 1999 and with other sociological studies of Catholics conducted by the authors in recent years.

One of the main results of the new survey was to confirm and reinforce earlier findings that younger adult Catholics tend to have a looser, more tenuous relationship with the church than their older counterparts. The younger Catholics are less likely to accept church teachings on issues of sex and marriage or to consider the church's teaching role important in such matters, for example, and they are less likely to attend Mass regularly or to consider Mass attendance important for being a good Catholic.

"The long-term trend in the level of Catholics' commitment to the institutional church from 1987 to 2005 was moderately downward, and, on the basis of

generational differences, we can predict a continued downward drift in the future," the study says.

"In contrast to earlier generations of young adult Catholics (born before 1960), who were taught to obey secular and religious authorities, today's young adults have been taught to think for themselves," it says. "They have been taught to take responsibility for their own relationship with God. Following these guidelines, young adults differentiate between beliefs and practices they consider central to the faith and ones they consider peripheral or optional."

"As long as they believe in God, Jesus' incarnation and resurrection and Mary as the mother of God and as long as they do whatever they can to love their neighbor, they do not feel obliged to attend Mass every week, go to confession every year, or even marry in the church," it adds.

"Many young adults feel they were never taught the basic truths of the Catholic faith. ... They do not understand their faith enough to explain it to their children," it says.

"Other young adults are troubled by the discrepancy between church teachings on sexual and reproductive issues and their own views on topics such as artificial birth control, abortion, homosexuality and the ordination of women and married men," it says.

"It is unlikely that the church will change its views on these issues any time soon," it adds. "Nor are ... Catholics (in the generations born 1960-78 or since 1978) likely to change their views. Thus, young adults - more than older Catholics - are faced with participating in an institution that does not reflect their worldview. The church also is confronted with ministering to young adults who disagree with many of its policies and practices. ... These tensions pose serious problems for both young adults and the church."

The study emphasizes that while these general descriptions apply to a significant number of young adult U.S. Catholics, they do not fit all.

"A sizable minority of young adults are very spiritual and highly religious," it says. "As Colleen Carroll has shown in her book, 'The New Faithful,' a sizable number of

young adults – we estimate about 20 percent – attend Mass and go to Communion regularly, go to confession occasionally, think of themselves as ‘orthodox’ Christians and read the Scriptures whenever they can. ... They see themselves as the future of the church and are quite naturally offended when others describe young adults as the problem.”

Despite that minority, the evidence suggests that most young adults “are only loosely tethered to the church,” it says.

It adds: “Barely half say they would never leave the church. ... Only one-fourth go to Mass on a weekly basis. Less than half believe that the teaching authority claimed by the Vatican is very important. A majority disagree with church teachings related to sexual and reproductive issues. ... And if a sizable number of young adults report that they do not understand their faith well enough to explain it to their own children, they have a problem, and so does the church.”