

Researcher says days of Catholics who ‘pay, pray and obey’ are gone

MIAMI – The days of Catholics who “pay, pray and obey” are gone and likely never coming back, according to a sociologist who has studied the beliefs and practices of American Catholics for more than two decades.

As a result, the church must find ways to reach new generations of Catholics who “don’t think church leaders are any wiser or any holier than they are,” said Purdue University’s James Davidson, who spoke at the opening session of the annual gathering of the Catholic Theological Society of America.

Davidson has conducted research on four generations of American Catholics, divided in relation to the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council: pre-Vatican II, those born in 1940 or earlier; Vatican II, born 1941-1960; post-Vatican II, born 1961-1982; and millennial, born since 1983. His findings set the tone for the June 5-8 conference, the theme of which was “Generations.”

Today’s Catholics are generally better off financially, better educated and more integrated into mainstream American culture than their pre-Vatican II counterparts, Davidson said.

They are no longer outsiders or victims of discrimination for whom the church was a refuge. They also grew up in a church where the emphasis shifted from the hierarchy to the people of God, from the ordained to the baptized.

“These formative experiences have lasting effects on the way Catholics think and act,” more so than age or any other factor, Davidson said.

But his research shows that even pre-Vatican II Catholics – those characterized by “extraordinarily high levels of religious participation and doctrinal orthodoxy” – have been moving toward a less hierarchical, more individualistic view of the church.

While 44 percent of pre-Vatican II Catholics said in 1987 that a person can be a good Catholic without obeying church teaching on divorce and remarriage, the

percentage rose to 52 in 2005. Similarly, in 1987, 39 percent said church leaders should have the final say on abortion, but only 33 percent said so in 2005. While 80 percent said in 1987 that they would never leave the church, only 69 percent agreed with that statement in 2005.

“The older they get, the more liberal they’re becoming,” Davidson said, even though pre-Vatican II Catholics remain more committed to the church than their Vatican II, post-Vatican II and millennial counterparts.

“As we move from the pre-Vatican II generation to the millennial generation, we see that today’s young adults are less likely to use institutional rules and regulations as their criteria when judging who is and who isn’t a good Catholic; less attached to the church; and less willing to grant religious authorities the final say in deciding what is right and wrong,” Davidson said.

Because formative experiences are so pivotal to people’s beliefs and practices, he suggested that church leaders, including theologians, pay more attention to today’s young adults.

“The best predictor of how people are going to think and act when they are in their 70s is how they thought and acted when they were in their teens and early 20s,” Davidson said.

“Therefore, if you want to affect the paths people take on their spiritual journeys, you will have more impact when they are in their teens and early 20s than when they are much younger or much older than that,” he continued.

“You should maximize your contact with adolescents and young adults while they are in junior high school, high school and college, and through other programs that reach 13- to 23-year-olds in other settings,” Davidson said.

“We really have to understand that the seeming divisions within the church are not the fault of the theologians, the bishops or the pastors,” said Terrence Tilley of Jesuit-run Fordham University, who, as incoming president of the theological society, chose the topic and organized the conference. “They’re problems we have to solve together.”

Tilley added that the question for current and future church leaders “is not who has the authority. The question is how do we convince (young people) to choose the right way? And authority is not the answer.”