

Strong identity, less commitment in young Catholics

WASHINGTON – Young adult Catholics have a strong Catholic identity but do not feel much of a commitment to the institutional church or its moral teachings, two sociologists said Feb. 6 in Washington.

The seemingly paradoxical assessment came from James A. Davidson of Purdue University in West Lafayette, Ind., and Dean R. Hoge of The Catholic University of America in Washington at a Woodstock Forum on the campus of Georgetown University.

Mr. Davidson and Mr. Hoge are co-authors with William V. D’Antonio of Catholic University and Mary L. Gautier of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown of “American Catholics Today: New Realities of Their Faith and Their Church,” to be published in late March by Rowman & Littlefield.

The book analyzes Gallup surveys from 1987, 1993, 1999 and 2005, and finds that Catholics born after 1979, in what the authors call the “millennial generation,” have deep differences from previous generations of Catholics – differences that are unlikely to disappear when they marry and have children.

“There’s a disconnect between them and the institutional church,” said Mr. Davidson. “And when they get older, they are not going to be like the Catholics of previous generations. They are going to be the Catholics they are now.”

Mr. Hoge said the disconnect might be exacerbated by the fact that the young diocesan priests who will serve the millennial generation are moving in the opposite direction, becoming more strict about some church teachings and more likely to adhere to the “cultic” model of priesthood as a man set apart than to the “servant-leader model” favored by the majority of older priests.

For example, while 94 percent of priests 35 or younger said they believe ordination confers “a permanent character making (the priest) essentially different from the laity,” only 70 percent of priests ages 56-65 said that. Asked whether the church

“needs to move faster in empowering laypeople in ministry,” 86 percent of the priests ages 56-65 and 54 percent of the youngest priests agreed.

For the purposes of their book, the sociologists divided the entire adult Catholic population into four groups – pre-Second Vatican Council, those over 65, who make up about 17 percent of U.S. Catholics; the Vatican II generation, ages 45-64, 35 percent; the post-Vatican II generation, ages 27-44, 40 percent; and the millennials, ages 18-26, 9 percent.

On abortion, 58 percent of the pre-Vatican II generation said abortion was a core Catholic teaching, but only 7 percent of the millennials did. Sixty-nine percent of the oldest group said homosexual behavior is always wrong, while only 37 percent of the young adult Catholics agreed.

On the question of premarital sex, there was a sharp drop in those who believe it is “always wrong” from the pre-Vatican II generation (62 percent) to the Vatican II generation (26 percent). The figure was only slightly lower for the post-Vatican II generation (22 percent) and the millennial generation (21 percent).

The margin of error was plus or minus 9 percentage points.

Referring to the forum’s theme, “Young Adult Catholics: Believing, Belonging and Serving,” Mr. Davidson said, “Belonging is not a problem; they feel comfortable calling the church home. And I don’t think serving is a problem. It’s the believing that’s the problem.”

Young adult Catholics see the church as having “no credibility, no plausibility, no authority,” he added. “They practice their faith by caring for other people.”

Responding to the sociologists’ talks, two women who work with young Catholics found signs of hope for the church in the next generation.

Catherine Heinhold, a campus minister and director of the Catholic retreat program at Georgetown, said many students believe “it is more important to serve the poor than to go to Mass” but they also feel “a very real, deep desire to grow in their faith and spirituality.”

“They respond well to outreach,” she said, “and they are really hungry for God.”

Sister Mary Carroll Kemp, a member of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary who is a ninth-grade religion teacher at Gonzaga College High School in Washington, said that although community service and retreat programs at the Jesuit-run school are not obligatory, “everyone wants to do them.”

But she said the most important element of the service programs and retreats is the time spent in faith-sharing and reflection each day, “talking the talk about Jesus, the Gospel and God.”