

Study: 74 percent of Irish Catholic women don't feel valued by church

DUBLIN - Irish Catholic women feel that they are not sufficiently appreciated by the church, but their faith remains strong, according to a newly published survey.

The research, which compared attitudes between Catholic and Protestant women, found that 74 percent of Catholic women surveyed felt that the church did not treat them with "a lot of respect." Among Protestant women, just 6.3 percent felt that lack of respect.

However, 61 percent of Catholic women said they looked to Mary as a positive role model who empowered them within the church, compared with 27 percent of Protestant women who looked to Mary.

When given a statement that the church had tried to control their position in society, 72.3 percent of Catholic women agreed compared with 19.7 percent of Protestant women.

The research, carried out by Trinity College Dublin among more than 500 women across 12 counties in the Irish Republic between 2002 and 2006, also found that religious faith remains strong among women and they remain actively involved in the church. Results were published in a book by Florence Craven of Trinity's Social Attitude and Policy Research Group.

Dominican Sister Geraldine Smyth of the Irish School of Ecumenics said she was not surprised by the figures.

She said the high percentage "needs to be listened to and attended to, not written off as lunatic fringe."

Sister Smyth said the Catholic Church "is wonderful at highlighting marginalization of women in society and standing up for vulnerable women in the social and political sphere," but that "does not translate in to the church where women are not sufficiently valued."

She said that if there is to be a meaningful process of Catholic renewal in Ireland, “the voice of women must be acknowledged, listened to and valued.

“Women have been excluded; this needs to be acknowledged and redressed in a practical way where the voices of women will be heard in structures within the church,” she said.

The research confirmed anecdotal evidence and reports from various diocesan “listening sessions” around the country, where Catholic women expressed frustration about feelings of exclusion.

In the Diocese of Ossory, where more than 800 people participated in the session, the final report noted: “It was strongly felt that, while women make up two-thirds of the congregation, they have little say or role within the church and its structures.

“It was felt that if more people, particularly women, had been involved in leadership roles in the church the manner in which the abuse allegations were dealt with would have been different,” it added.

In Kerry, where more than 500 people participated, many people expressed strong views that the church is marginalizing lay people, particularly women. Some said the Irish church’s introduction of the permanent diaconate further excluded women from playing a “real role” in the church.