

# Survey assesses Catholics' beliefs, practices on Mass

WASHINGTON – As the U.S. Catholic Church prepared to welcome Pope Benedict XVI, a new survey found big differences among Catholics of different generations about the importance of the sacraments in their lives.

Asked which sacrament was most meaningful in their lives, 39 percent of respondents named baptism, 26 percent said marriage and 25 percent named the Eucharist. Among those who said they attended Mass weekly or more often, 52 percent said the Eucharist was most meaningful in their lives.

The study also divided respondents into four generations in relation to the Second Vatican Council: pre-Vatican II, comprised of those born before 1943; Vatican II, born between 1943 and 1960; post-Vatican II, born 1961 to 1981; and millennial Catholics, born after 1981.

While those of the first three generations chose the Eucharist as their most meaningful sacrament, 43 percent of the millennial Catholics said marriage was the sacrament most meaningful to them.

The survey of 1,007 self-identified adult Catholics was commissioned by the U.S. bishops' Department of Communications and conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University in Washington. A 178-page report on the results was released April 13.

The margin of error for the survey was plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.

The survey found that for each succeeding generation the percentage who had made their first Communion and first confession and received the sacrament of confirmation declined.

While 95 percent of Catholics in the pre-Vatican II generation and 91 percent of the Vatican II generation said they had been confirmed, only 79 percent of post-Vatican II Catholics and 69 percent of millennial Catholics said they had received the

sacrament of confirmation.

The percentage of Catholics who had made their first Communion ranged from 99 percent of pre-Vatican II Catholics to 85 percent of millennial Catholics. For first confession, the range was from 98 percent of the oldest generation to 84 percent of the youngest generation.

Only 2 percent of Catholics across all generations said they participated in the sacrament of reconciliation once a month or more, 12 percent said they did several times a year, 12 percent said they did once a year, 30 percent said less than once a year and 45 percent said they never made a sacramental confession.

The CARA report, titled “Sacraments Today: Belief and Practice Among U.S. Catholics,” summarized responses to a wide range of questions about Catholics’ attitudes toward and participation in the Mass and the sacraments, their knowledge of the Catholic faith, their views on church leadership and teachings, and whether they pray the rosary, carry religious objects or have pictures of Mary hanging in their homes.

Archbishop George H. Niederauer of San Francisco, who authorized the study as chairman of the U.S. bishops’ Committee on Communications, said the results would offer guidance to church leaders.

“It reveals good will, healthy attitudes toward neighbor and an openness to the church among young Catholics,” he said in a news release. “Yet it also points out a need for greater efforts in education for both adults and young people.”

CARA found that 69 percent of pre-Vatican II Catholics strongly agreed with the statement “I am proud to be a Catholic,” but that the percentage of those who agreed declined with each succeeding generation. Among Vatican II Catholics, 56 percent strongly agreed, while the numbers were 53 percent for post-Vatican II Catholics and 50 percent for millennial Catholics.

“It’s heartening that so many are proud to call themselves Catholic,” Archbishop Niederauer said. “The challenge for church leaders is to help them see what Catholicism really means.”

When asked whether they agreed with the statement, “In deciding what is morally acceptable, I look to Catholic Church teachings and statements made by the pope and bishops to form my conscience,” the pre-Vatican II Catholics (28 percent) and millennial Catholics (23 percent) were most strongly in agreement.

Only 15 percent of Vatican II Catholics and 14 percent of post-Vatican II Catholics said they strongly agreed with that statement.

Millennial Catholics (38 percent) also were the most likely to strongly agree that “I can be a good Catholic without going to Mass every Sunday.” Only 31 percent of pre-Vatican II Catholics, 35 percent of Vatican II Catholics and 33 percent of post-Vatican II Catholics strongly agreed.

Nearly a quarter (23 percent) of the Catholics in the survey said they attended Mass at least once a week, a figure CARA said has remained unchanged over the past five years.

Knowledge about the Catholic faith generally was higher among the older generations than the younger ones, but the survey found that knowledge of the Bible was higher among younger Catholics than their older counterparts.

Millennial Catholics attending church at least once a month were similar to the pre-Vatican II Catholics in agreeing that “Jesus Christ is really present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist.”

The youngest and oldest generations also were more likely than those in the Vatican II and post-Vatican II generations to say that they abstained from meat on Fridays during Lent and typically received ashes at Ash Wednesday services.

Nearly half of the millennial group (46 percent) said they usually gave up or abstained from something besides meat on Fridays during Lent, compared to 30 percent of the pre-Vatican II generation, 34 percent of the Vatican II group and 38 percent of the post-Vatican II Catholics.

Not surprisingly, CARA found that “frequency of Mass attendance is a strong indicator of the general importance of Catholicism in a person’s life and of his or her level of commitment to living out the faith.”

“In general, the more frequently one attends Mass, the more frequently he or she participates in other church or religious activities, the greater his or her knowledge about the Catholic faith, the greater his or her awareness of current events in the church, and the greater his or her adherence to church teachings,” the report said.

About six in 10 Catholics (59 percent) said they had a statue or picture of Mary in their home, up from 56 percent in a 2003 survey. About a third (32 percent) said they typically wore or carried a crucifix or cross with them, while 29 percent said they usually carried or wore a religious medal or pin of a saint or angel.

Slightly less than one quarter (23 percent) usually carried a rosary, while 20 percent said they typically had prayer cards or religious coins with them and 9 percent said they carried a scapular.

Asked if they ever prayed the rosary, 11 percent of Catholics said they prayed it at least “almost every week,” while 48 percent said they never did. Those numbers were similar to the results of a 2001 CARA poll that included that question.

More than four-fifths of U.S. Catholics (82 percent) said they were somewhat or very satisfied with the leadership of Pope Benedict XVI, while 72 percent said they were somewhat or very satisfied with the leadership of the U.S. bishops, a rise of 14 percentage points since 2004.

“As documented in several CARA polls, the increase in satisfaction with the bishops since 2004 is part of a larger trend of a recovery in satisfaction with the leadership of the church since the height of the sexual abuse scandal in 2002,” the report said.