

Survey shows many Catholics pray regularly but fewer active in parish

WASHINGTON - Less than a third of U.S. Catholics participate regularly in selected pastoral or community activities at their churches, though nearly 80 percent say they pray at least weekly, according to the latest report from the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

The survey released June 23 was a wide-ranging compilation of data covering religious affiliations, practices, beliefs and how faith influences people's political positions and activities. With information drawn from more than 35,000 interviews conducted in the spring and summer of 2007, the massive database is being sorted and gradually released by Pew in several reports.

Among details that stand out in the current report is that only 31 percent of Catholics say they participate monthly in at least one of selected activities through their parishes, including the church choir, community or volunteer work, work with children and parish social activities. Of those activities, the highest rate of participation was 20 percent who said they attended social activities at least monthly.

Thirty-seven percent of all people surveyed - which included atheists, agnostics and people unaffiliated with any faith - participate in one of those activities.

Among all Protestants, the participation rate was 49 percent, with higher rates among evangelicals (54 percent) and historically black churches (60 percent). Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as Mormons, had the highest rate of participation for an individual denomination at 77 percent, followed by Jehovah's Witnesses, at 76 percent.

Of the whole U.S. group, 58 percent said they pray daily and another 17 percent said they pray at least once a week. Of Catholics, 58 percent said they pray daily and another 21 percent said they pray at least weekly.

As for types of prayer, half the total surveyed and half of Catholics said they practice

meditation either weekly or at least occasionally.

Catholics are less likely than the population as a whole to read Scripture outside religious services. Less than a quarter – 21 percent of Catholics – said they read Scripture weekly, and another 21 percent said they do so monthly or at least yearly. Of the whole population, 35 percent said they read Scripture weekly and another 18 percent do so regularly.

Just 29 percent of Catholics said they participate in prayer groups, Scripture study sessions or other types of religious education on a regular basis, with just 13 percent doing so weekly and 16 percent participating monthly or yearly. Across all faith groups, 23 percent take part in such activities weekly and 17 percent do so monthly, the survey said.

The groups most likely to be involved weekly in prayer or religious education are Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons. Eighty-two percent of Jehovah's Witnesses take part in such activities weekly and 64 percent of Mormons do.

Forty-two percent of Catholics said they attend Mass at least once a week, with another 39 percent who go to Mass at least a few times a year. Of the whole population, 39 percent go to religious services at least weekly, and another 33 percent attend at least a few times a year.

Again, Jehovah's Witnesses were the most frequent participants in church services, with 82 percent attending at least once a week, including 71 percent who go more than once a week.

One somewhat puzzling statistic from the survey was that 21 percent of people who identified themselves as atheists said they believe in God. Five percent of people who self-identified as Catholic said they either don't believe in God or aren't certain God exists.

About 5 percent of the total population surveyed said they don't believe in God, another 5 percent weren't certain. The highest percentage of people who professed membership in a faith group yet said they don't believe in God was 19 percent of Buddhists, followed by 10 percent of Jews.

Pew senior fellow John Green said the apparent contradiction, particularly among self-professed atheists, arose among people who first said they were atheist, then answered later questions in the affirmative when asked about specific beliefs.

“Their responses may not mean they don’t believe in God, but that they don’t like organized religion,” Green said in a teleconference about the survey results.

In response to questions about what type of God they believe in, 60 percent of Catholics believe they can have a personal relationship with God, while 29 percent think of God as an impersonal force. That roughly matches the overall survey result of 60 percent who believe in a personal God and 25 percent who think of God as an impersonal force.

The statistical margin of error for the entire sample of 35,556 people is plus or minus 0.6 percentage points. Margins of error vary for subgroups, depending upon the sample size. Results for the sample of 8,054 Catholics have a margin of error of plus or minus 1.5 percentage points.

Results are based on telephone interviews conducted between May and August of 2007.