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Catholics Back Strong Steps on Abuse, Poll Finds

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American Roman Catholics say that priests who sexually abuse children and teenagers should be barred from participating in parish life and that any accusations of abuse should be investigated by local law enforcement rather than the church, according to the latest New York Times/CBS News Poll.

Church leaders in Rome last week appeared split about how to handle cases of past abuse — that is, whether to apply a zero tolerance policy to all offenders, future and past — but American Catholics showed few signs of ambivalence as regards “parish life.” Nearly 8 in 10 of those polled said a past abuser should be barred from “parish life” even if “church leaders believe he is truly sorry for what happened.”

Seventy percent said Catholic lay people should be involved in decisions about cases of abuse by priests, not just the clergy. “We have children and can identify with those families that are being hurt,” said Helen Crowley, 73, of Pittsburgh.

Nearly half of the Catholics polled saw “some” progress in last week’s meeting of American cardinals at the Vatican — 13 percent saw “a lot” — but there were several signs of continuing, deep discontent.

Indeed, the poll, conducted Sunday through Wednesday, indicates a striking breach between American

Catholics and their leadership on these issues. It also suggests that the scandal is taking a toll on the image of Pope John Paul II. Fifty-three percent of American Catholics said they had a favorable view of the pope — a drop of 16 percentage points from a CBS News poll conducted two weeks earlier, before the Vatican meeting was called to deal with the issue.

The nationwide poll interviewed 1,172 adults by telephone, including 433 Catholics. It has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus three percentage points for all adults and five points for Catholics.

The poll was conducted in the af-

termath of a two-day emergency meeting at the Vatican on the question of sexual abuse, at which American cardinals and leaders of the bishops conference suggested they would move toward a policy of zero tolerance for future offenders. But they appeared to be divided over whether all past offenders should also be automatically removed.

On many questions in the poll Catholic opinion matched or paralleled that of the total American public. For instance, 62 percent of Catholics said American Catholic leaders had done a poor job of handling the

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scandal. Sixty-one percent of all respondents held the same view.

But on a few topics Catholics and the total set of respondents expressed contrasting opinions, mostly those with which Catholics have the benefit of greater familiarity. For example, only 28 percent of Catholics said celibacy increased the likelihood of priests abusing minors, while 49 percent of the total polled took that view.

Nearly half the Catholics surveyed said the pope had done a poor job handling the problem of sexual abuse of children and teenagers in the church, and 48 percent said they believed he knew about the problem all along. While 71 percent of Catholics said they felt the pope and other church leaders "took the issue seriously enough" when they met in Rome, 58 percent said the pope should have generally done more to address the problem.

"The pope represents well the philosophies and the goals of Roman Catholics," said Steven Clay, 55, of Lansdowne, Pa., "but I think he's behind the times with the sexual abuse cases. I think he was out of touch or put out of touch by people who shelter him."

Discontent was also voiced about American church leaders; a majority of Catholic respondents said they thought those leaders had done a poor job. Asked if those leaders had gone far enough in publicly apologizing to the victims of cleric abuse, nearly 6 in 10 said they had not.

Poll respondents generally said that the problem of sexual abuse of children and teenagers was as common in other walks of life as in the priesthood. A majority of all those polled also said that the problem was limited to "a few or hardly any priests," a position held by most Catholics as well.

American Catholics were overwhelmingly in favor of allowing priests to marry. More than 7 in 10 supported a married priesthood, up from about half who felt that way 30 years ago.

"We had an exceptional priest for eight years and he left the priesthood because he wanted to get married," said Melanie Baldwin, a 40-year-old teacher from Durango, Colo. "We lost a great man to marriage who had been a priest for 20 years. I support priests marrying because I think it would bring better quality men into the priesthood."

How the Poll Was Conducted

The latest New York Times/CBS News Poll is based on telephone interviews conducted Sunday through Wednesday with 1,172 adults throughout the United States. Of these, 433 said their current religious preference was Roman Catholic.

The sample of telephone exchanges called was randomly selected by a computer from a complete list of more than 42,000 residential exchanges across the country.

Within each exchange, random digits were added to form a complete telephone number, thus permitting access to listed and unlisted numbers alike. Within each household, one adult was designated by a random procedure to be the respondent for the survey.

The results have been weighted to take account of household size and number of telephone lines into the residence and to adjust for variation in the sample relating to geographic region, sex, race, age and education.

Catholics were oversampled and then weighted to their proper proportion of the population.

In theory, in 19 cases out of 20, the results based on such samples will differ by no more than three percentage points in either direction from what would have been obtained by seeking out all American adults.

For smaller subgroups the margin of sampling error is larger. For Catholics it is plus or minus five points.

In addition to sampling error, the practical difficulties of conducting any survey of public opinion may introduce other sources of error into the poll. Variation in the wording and order of questions, for example, may lead to somewhat different results.

But 6 in 10 Catholics surveyed said they did not believe that celibacy was a cause of the abuse problem.

While most of the Catholics surveyed had no opinion of Cardinal Bernard F. Law of the Boston Archdiocese, now under fire for his handling of these cases, those who did were overwhelmingly negative.

In contrast, Catholics voiced high levels of trust and confidence in their own parish priests, and said the scandal had not affected their attendance at Mass or their contributions. Most Catholics said they still felt comfortable around their parish priest and most — including the mothers of young children — said they would have no trepidation about leaving their child alone with him.

Most Catholics also said they believed that their priest was in touch with the needs of modern Catholics — 65 percent, compared with 40 percent who felt that way about

ONLINE: FULL POLL RESULTS
The complete results of the poll are available at nytimes.com/national.

church leaders; men felt particularly attuned with their parish priest. While a majority of Catholics said the pope was more conservative than they are on issues of personal morality, a majority said their parish priest felt about the same as they did on these issues.

A majority also said that if their son or daughter expressed an interest in becoming a priest or a nun, they would encourage them to do so.

The scandal, in fact, highlighted the complicated attitudes American Catholics have toward their church, and the gap in trust between the parish and the hierarchy. For example, 63 percent of Catholics said their priest had done a good job in dealing with the sexual abuse issue; 49 percent said their local bishop had done a good job, and 27 percent said the American leaders of the Catholic church had done a good job.

For all the debate over the question, many Catholics resist connecting the scandal to gay priests. A majority said they did not believe that the presence of gay men in the church raised the likelihood of sexual abuse, which some church leaders have suggested.

A majority of Catholics also said they did not believe that there were more gays in the priesthood than in other walks of life. But American Catholics were divided over whether a gay man should be ordained at all, even if he remained celibate. Men were more likely than women to oppose such ordination, and Catholics older than 64 more likely to oppose it than younger people.

American Catholics also overwhelmingly supported the ordination of women; more than 6 in 10 of those polled said they supported female priests, up from more than half who supported the idea in 1987, when a Times/CBS News poll first asked that question.

As reflected in previous polls, Catholics disagree with the church's position on artificial methods of birth control: 71 percent of those polled favored it, while the church forbids it. Other areas of disagreement include the death penalty, which is opposed by the church yet supported by most American Catholics.

How Catholics View the Scandal

SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

How widespread do you think sexual abuse of children and teenagers by Catholic priests is: do you think many priests do it, a few priests do it, or do hardly any priests do it?

MANY	FEW	N.A.
11	44	39
HARDLY ANY		

Do you personally know any of the priests accused of sexual abuse?

YES	NO
10	90

HOW HAS THE PROBLEM BEEN HANDLED BY:

the pope and the Vatican?	WELL	POORLY	N.A.
	40%	45	15
U.S. leaders of the Catholic Church?	27	62	11
local bishops?	49	24	27
parish priests?	63	7	30

POSSIBLE FACTORS

Has the requirement of celibacy increased the likelihood that priests will sexually abuse minors?	DECREASE	2	N.A.
	28%	59	10
	INCREASE		NOT A FACTOR
Has homosexuality increased the likelihood that priests will abuse minors?	17	9	64
			11

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE

if a Catholic priest is accused of sexual abuse, should his superiors give the information to law enforcement?	YES	CHURCH INVESTIGATION	N.A.
	83%	87	2
			BOTH
Should a priest who has been known to have sexually abused a minor be forbidden from participating in parish life?	YES	NO	N.A.
	77	16	6
Should Catholic Church leaders in the U.S. who mishandled cases of sexual abuse resign from office?	YES	NO	N.A.
	71	22	7

PERSONAL REACTIONS

Have charges of sexual abuse against priests affected your:	MORE		4	1
attendance at Mass in the past month?	89%		6	
	NO EFFECT		LESS	
giving money to the Church?	82		17	
Would you be comfortable if your own child was alone with your parish priest?	YES	NO		
	71	22	6	
			N.A.	

Based on 433 current Catholics nationwide, interviewed by telephone from April 28 to May 1, 2002. Percentages may not add to 100 because of rounding.

* No opinion