

## ***The CARA Catholic Poll Digest*** **Spring 2007**

***Good News: Nearly three in ten adult Catholics read their diocesan newspaper***  
By Mark M. Gray, Ph.D.

Recently released results of a 2005 CARA Catholic Poll conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) may have caused some concern among the Catholic media.

According to The Catholic Press Association, the total circulation of newspapers and magazines published by dioceses and eparchies in the United States in 2007 is more than 5.9 million. The most recent *Official Catholic Directory* reports a U.S. Catholic population total of 64 million. These numbers suggest that there are relatively few copies of these publications given the size of the Catholic population.

To better understand readership of diocesan newspapers the CARA survey asked a national representative sample of self-identifying Catholic adults, “In the last six months have you read your diocesan newspaper?” Because CARA could identify where the respondent lived, the question also included the exact title of their diocesan publication (91 percent of adult Catholics live in a diocese with a publication. Those who do not were still asked the question without the specific title). In response to this question, 25 percent of Catholics said they had read their diocesan paper. To many publishers, even this may have been a disappointing percentage.

Wouldn't it be better if at least half of Catholics read these papers? Or even two-thirds? Of course—especially if you're an editor or the bishop who is responsible for budgets that keep diocesan papers in print. Yet results of this survey give cause to be quite optimistic about the future of diocesan papers.

CARA has replicated the diocesan newspaper readership question in two more recent surveys. Based on this series of surveys, CARA estimates that 25 to 30 percent of adult Catholics read their diocesan newspapers with some regularity. For the sake of discussion, let's take the mid-point of the estimates and assume that 27.5 percent of adult Catholics are readers.

What does that mean? A lot more than it may seem. We can understand the percentage better by converting it into a population estimate.

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that the nation's total current population is 301 million, of which 224 million are age 18 or older. CARA and other academic and media surveys consistently estimate that Catholics make up about 23 percent of the U.S. adult population. Thus, surveys of self-identified adult Catholic currently represent a population of 51.5 million. Multiplying 27.5 percent by 51.5 million we can estimate that 14.2 million Catholics—or nearly 5 percent of the *total* U.S. population—have read a

diocesan newspaper or magazine at least once in the last six months. In other words, almost one in 20 U.S. residents has read a diocesan newspaper or magazine in the last six months. In fact, the true estimate may be even larger because CARA surveys did not include interviews with non-Catholics. Given that 16 percent of all adult Catholics are married to a non-Catholic spouse, there is a large pool of potential non-Catholic readers of diocesan papers.

To put the 14.2 million readers in context, here are some other types of media consumed by this number of people:

- In a typical week, this is the number of viewers for a program in the top ten of the U.S. Nielsen Media Research broadcast television ratings.
- It is about the same as the combined total largest circulation numbers of the 14 most read newspapers in the United States, as reported by the Audit Bureau of Circulations including *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Denver Post/Rocky Mountain News*, *Chicago Tribune*, *The Washington Post*, *New York Daily News*, *New York Post*, *Houston Chronicle*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, and *Boston Globe*.
- It is more than the U.S. readership of any magazine *not* published by the Association for the Advancement of Retired People (AARP). It is 4 million more readers than *Reader's Digest* and 6 million more readers than *TV Guide*.
- It is more than the total number of U.S. satellite radio subscribers (Sirius and XM Radio combined).
- It is only slightly less than the total number of unique monthly visitors worldwide to the Orbitz and YouTube websites in recent months.
- Only 32 music albums/CDs have ever sold more than 14 million copies in the U.S.

Thus, when one converts survey percentages into population numbers things do not look so negative. In fact they look sufficiently positive that skeptics might even say they do not trust survey data and that respondents might be lying about their reading behavior. This is a serious issue in survey research often referred to as social desirability bias. This is a tendency for respondents to report a socially desirable behavior to an interviewer because they are ashamed to say they don't. However, CARA asked this question in surveys conducted with and without an interviewer (respondents answer onscreen) and the results are consistent. Catholics are not ashamed to tell an interviewer that they don't read their diocesan newspaper.

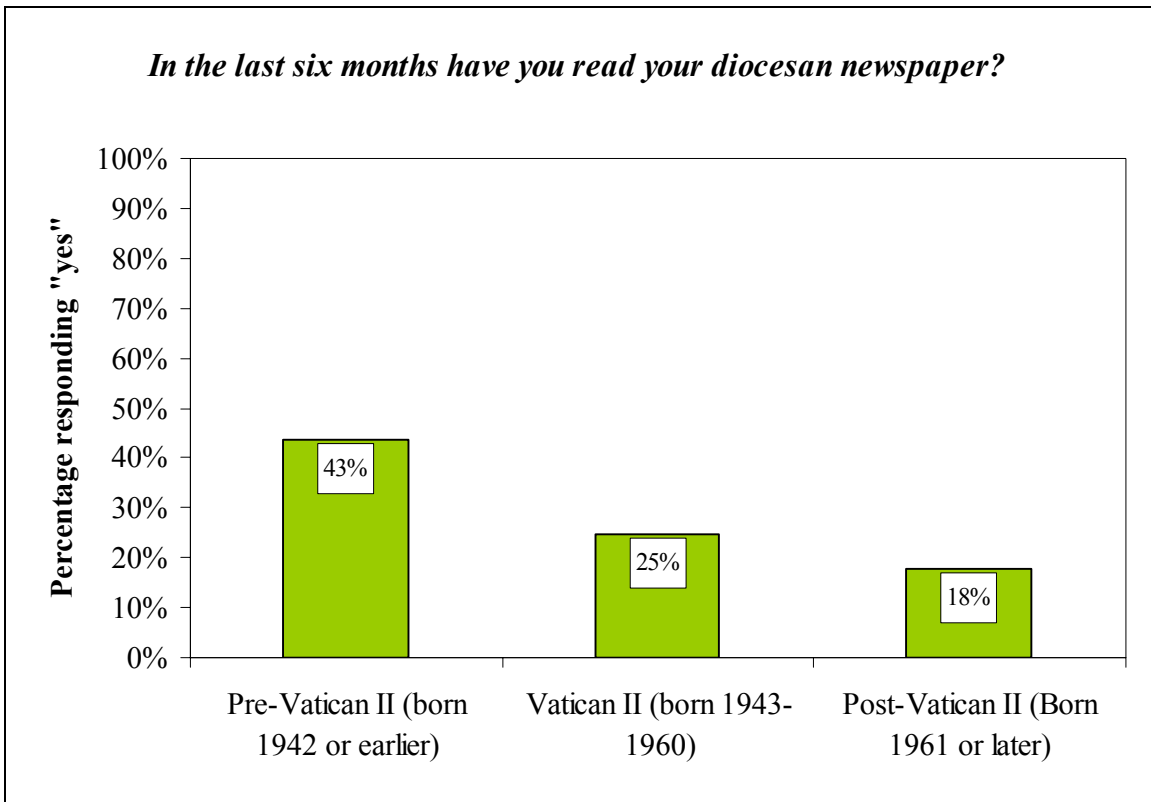
Although many would prefer that "at least half" of Catholics read their diocesan papers it is important to note that there are actually few things that half or more of Catholics do with any regularity. For example CARA Catholic Polls (CCP) indicate that:

- 59% live in a household registered with a parish
- 50% live in a household that regularly contributes to the offertory at their parish
- 45% have attended a Catholic elementary school
- 36% read their parish bulletin weekly

- 33% say they attend Mass weekly or more often
- 26% participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation at least once a year
- 18% read the Bible at least monthly

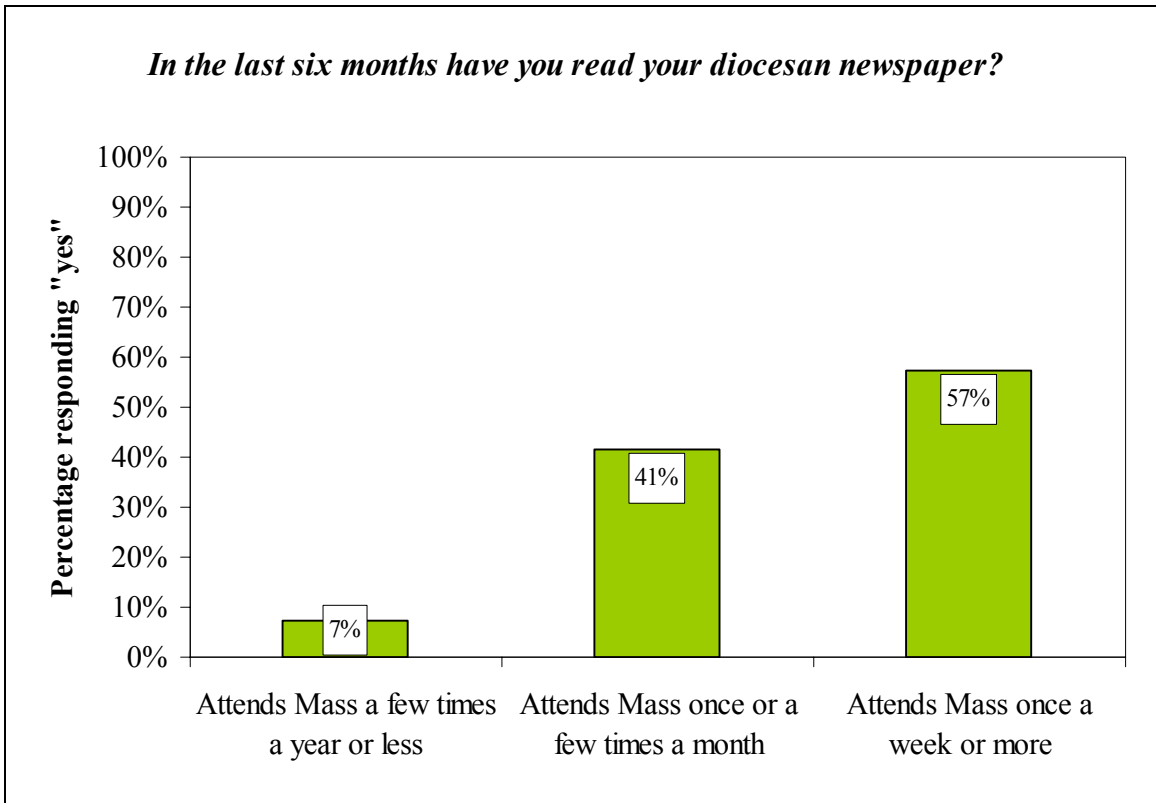
The percentage of Catholics reading their diocesan newspaper is not all that different from percentages who participate in many other aspects of their faith. So just who are these 14.2 million Catholics? What does a diocesan newspaper reader look like? Sub-group differences in readership of diocesan newspapers are strongly related to age and Mass attendance.

More than four in ten Pre-Vatican II Catholics have read their diocesan newspaper in the last six months. Only a quarter of Vatican II Catholics have read their paper during this period, as have fewer than one in five Post-Vatican II Catholics.



As shown below, Catholics who attend Mass at least once a month are much more likely than those attending less frequently to have read their diocesan paper in the last six months. Nearly six in ten Catholics who attend Mass once a week or more have read their paper in the last six months. Four in ten of those attending at least monthly have done the same. Just 7 percent of those Catholics who attend Mass a few times a year or less often have read their diocesan newspaper in the last half year.

*In the last six months have you read your diocesan newspaper?*



There are several other sub-groups of Catholics who are more likely than others to read their diocesan paper. Those who are registered with a parish, who subscribe to a secular daily newspaper, women, those residing in the Midwest and South, and those who have attended a Catholic high school or a Catholic college or university are also more likely to read a diocesan paper.

*Copies of the complete report, "Catholic Media Use in the United States" can be ordered from the [cara.georgetown.edu](http://cara.georgetown.edu) or by calling 202-687-8080.*