

# ***Sacraments Today: Belief and Practice among U.S. Catholics***

## **Executive Summary**

In December 2007 the Department of Communications of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) commissioned the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University to conduct a survey of adult Catholics in the United States. The focus of the survey is participation in the sacramental life of the Church as well as beliefs about the sacraments.<sup>1</sup> However, the poll also addresses many other issues of importance to the Church, including other forms of participation in Church life and other teachings of Catholicism. A questionnaire was designed by CARA in consultation with the Department of Communications. See Appendix I for the complete questionnaire. The following are among the major topic areas:

- How Catholics have entered the Church
- The general sacramental lives of Catholics
- The Mass and Eucharist
- Reconciliation
- Anointing of the Sick
- Ordinations and vocations
- Religious devotions and practices in daily life
- General Catholic beliefs and attitudes

In February 2008 CARA surveyed 1,007 self-identified adult Catholics from Knowledge Networks large national panel of households, which have been assembled by regular random telephone survey methods (probability sampling).<sup>2</sup> A survey with this number of respondents has a margin of sampling error of  $\pm 3.1$  percent. As a rule of thumb, every 1 percentage point of the total adult Catholic population is equivalent to approximately 500,000 persons.<sup>3</sup> The Knowledge Networks panel is known to closely approximate the demographic characteristics of the U.S. population.<sup>4</sup> The panel is updated on a quarterly basis and those persons who are sampled and asked to join the Knowledge Networks panel receive subsidized Internet access and

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<sup>1</sup> The sacrament of Marriage was studied in a previous poll commissioned by the Committee on Marriage and Family Life of the USCCB. The complete report for this study, *Marriage in the Catholic Church: A Survey of U.S. Catholics*, is available on the CARA website: <http://cara.georgetown.edu/MarriageReport.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> CARA has conducted national Catholic surveys with Knowledge Networks on six previous occasions since 2002.

<sup>3</sup> CARA Catholic Polls (CCP), national random-digit dial telephone polls, consistently estimate that between 22 and 23 percent of the adult population in the U.S. self identifies as Catholic. Taking this proportion of the most recent Census Bureau estimates for the size of the U.S. adult population we estimate that 1 percent of the adult Catholic population is approximately equivalent to 500,000 persons (or more specifically 510,300 as of April 2008).

<sup>4</sup> The Knowledge Networks panel has been shown to be representative to well within 1 percentage point to the U.S. Census Current Population Survey (CPS) demographics for gender, age, race and ethnicity, education, and region. See Baker et al. (2003), "Validity of the Survey of Health and Internet and Knowledge Networks Panel and Sampling," Stanford University and Krosnick and Chiat Chang (2001), "A Comparison of Random Digit Dialing Telephone Survey Methodology with Internet Survey Methodology as Implemented by Knowledge Networks and Harris Interactive," Ohio State University.

other incentives. For those who do not own computers, Knowledge Networks provides a television-based Internet system (MSN TV) for free. These steps ensure that the Knowledge Networks panel is as reflective as possible of the national population and that it is not biased towards those who have pre-existing access to the Internet.

Throughout the report consistent differences are noted in the responses to the survey made by sub-groups of respondents. The two most important of these subgroups are defined by Mass attendance and generation.

Various social scientific studies of contemporary Catholics have revealed important differences among generations. Older Catholics, especially those who came of age prior to Vatican II, are typically more involved in Church life and attend Mass more frequently than younger generations of Catholics. In general, they tend to score higher on most survey items that measure “commitment” to Catholicism. Knowledge about the Catholic faith also varies by generation and is frequently greatest among older Catholics. However, this depends on the topic. For example, knowledge of Church teachings and obligations is usually higher among older Catholics, but knowledge of the Bible is typically greater among younger generations. Agreement with Church teachings is, again, often relatively high among the oldest Catholics, the Pre-Vatican II Generation (born before 1943). To a lesser extent this is also true of the Millennial Generation, Catholics (born after 1981) currently in their mid-20s and younger. Agreement with Church teaching is typically lowest among the generation of Catholics who came of age during the changes associated with Vatican II (born between 1943 and 1960) and among Post-Vatican II Generation Catholics (born 1961 to 1981) though this too depends on the teaching in question.

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. Consequently, analyzing survey responses according to frequency of attendance consistently reveals strong differences among Catholics. 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.

Major findings of the study are noted below.

## **Major Findings**

### ***Experience of Sacraments***

- Six in ten respondents (61 percent) agree “somewhat” or “strongly” with the statement, “Sacraments are essential to my faith.” More than nine in ten adult Catholics (92 percent) have received their First Communion and 84 percent have celebrated the sacrament of Confirmation. Nearly all weekly Mass attenders and those who have attended Catholic educational institutions have received their First Communion and have been confirmed.

- Older Catholics are more likely than younger Catholics to have celebrated their First Reconciliation, First Communion, or the sacrament of Confirmation. With each generation the percentage having celebrated each of these sacraments decreases. For example, 99 percent of those of the Pre-Vatican II Generation have celebrated their First Communion, compared to 94 percent of the Vatican II Generation, 91 percent of the Post-Vatican II Generation, and 85 percent of the Millennial Generation. The differences between generations for the sacrament of Confirmation are even larger. Ninety-five percent of those of the Pre-Vatican II Generation have been confirmed, compared to 91 percent of the Vatican II Generation, 79 percent of the Post-Vatican II Generation, and 69 percent of the Millennial Generation.
- Respondents were asked how meaningful each of the seven sacraments are to them. More than eight in ten adult Catholics say the following four are either “somewhat” or “very” meaningful to them: Marriage (89 percent), Baptism (88 percent), the Eucharist (84 percent), and Confirmation (83 percent). Nearly all Catholics (90 percent or more) who attend Mass weekly or more often say *all* seven sacraments are at least “somewhat” meaningful to them.
- Of the seven sacraments, Catholics are *least* likely to say the sacrament of Reconciliation is “somewhat” or “very” meaningful to them. Only two-thirds (66 percent) of adult Catholics responded as such (39 percent “very” meaningful).
- When asked which of the seven sacraments was personally “*most* meaningful” to them, Baptism is selected most often (39 percent). However, weekly Mass attenders are more likely to say the Eucharist is personally “most meaningful” to them (52 percent). Catholics of the Millennial Generation are most likely to select the sacrament of Marriage as being the “most meaningful” (43 percent).
- Respondents with children were asked about the importance they place on their children celebrating their First Reconciliation, First Communion, and Confirmation. These parents are most likely to say it is “somewhat” or “very” important that their children celebrate First Communion (81 percent), followed by Confirmation (78 percent), and finally First Reconciliation (77 percent). Nearly all parents who attend Mass at least once a month say it is at least “somewhat” important that their children celebrate all three of these sacraments.

### ***Mass and Eucharist***

- More than three in ten adult Catholics (31.4 percent) are estimated to be attending Mass in *any* given week. This is equivalent to 16.1 million adult Mass attendees per week. Twenty-three percent say they attend Mass *every* week (once a week or more often). This has remained unchanged—within margins of sampling error in the last five years. Mass attendance is highest among Catholics who are older, female, married to another Catholic, who have a college degree or more, and who attended Catholic educational institutions—especially a Catholic college or university.

- Nine in ten or more Mass attending Catholics (attending at least a “few times a year”) say the following aspects of Mass are at least “somewhat” important to them: feeling the presence of God (94 percent), prayer and reflection (93 percent), and receiving Eucharist (92 percent). Aspects of less importance include the music (71 percent) and the Church environment and decorations (66 percent).
- Among Catholics who have celebrated their First Communion, eight in ten (79 percent) who attend Mass at least once a week say they “always” receive Eucharist at Mass. By comparison, 66 percent of those attending Mass less than weekly but at least once a month receive the Eucharist this often, as do only 31 percent of those who attend Mass a few times a year or less often.
- A majority of adult Catholics, 57 percent, say their belief about the Eucharist is reflected best by the statement “Jesus Christ is really present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist,” compared to 43 percent who said their belief is best reflected in the statement, “Bread and wine are symbols of Jesus, but Jesus is not really present.” Among all Catholics, members of the Pre-Vatican II Generation are more likely than all other Catholics to believe that Christ is really present in the Eucharist (70 percent compared to 54 percent). Among Catholics attending Mass at least once a month, those of the youngest generation, the Millennials, are just as likely to believe Christ is really present in the Eucharist as Pre-Vatican II Catholics (85 percent compared to 86 percent). Nine in ten of all weekly Mass attenders (91 percent) say their belief about the Eucharist is reflected best by the statement “Jesus Christ is really present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist.”
- Respondents who do not attend Mass weekly were asked about things that might explain why they missed Mass in the last six months. Among Catholics who attend Mass less than weekly but at least once a month, a busy schedule or lack of time (51 percent), family responsibilities (48 percent), or health problems or a disability (41 percent) are the most frequently cited reasons that at least “somewhat” explain why they missed Mass. Among Catholics attending Mass a few times a year or less often, the most common reasons cited that explain at least “somewhat” their missing Mass are that they don’t believe “missing Mass is a sin” (64 percent) and that they are “not a very religious person” (50 percent).
- About a third of respondents (34 percent) agree “strongly” with the statement, “I can be a good Catholic without going to Mass every Sunday.” More than two-thirds (68 percent) agree with this statement at least “somewhat.”
- Eighty-three percent of Mass attending Catholics say it is “somewhat” or “very” important to them that Mass is celebrated in a language they most prefer and 70 percent say it is similarly important that the Mass is celebrated in a way that reflects their ethnic and ancestral culture.
- Only 12 percent of adult Catholics say they “always” attend Mass on a Holy Day of Obligation when these do not fall on a Sunday. Twenty-three percent say they do this “frequently or usually,” 39 percent say they do this “seldom,” and 26 percent say they “never” do this. Forty-one percent of those who attend Mass at least once a week say they “always” attend Mass on a Holy Day of Obligation. Pre-Vatican II Generation Catholics are

more than twice as likely as members of any younger generation to say they “always” attend Mass on these days (27 percent compared to 10 percent).

### ***Reconciliation***

- Twenty-six percent of adult Catholics say they participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation once a year or more often (this is equivalent to 13.3 million adults). Only 2 percent of Catholics do so once a month or more often. Thirty percent say they go to Confession less than once a year and 45 percent say they never do so.
- More than six in ten weekly Mass attenders (63 percent) participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation once a year or more often, compared to 37 percent of those attending Mass less than weekly but at least once a month and only 6 percent of those attending less often.
- Sixty-two percent of Catholics agree “somewhat” or “strongly” with the statement, “I can be a good Catholic without celebrating the sacrament of Reconciliation at least once a year” (33 percent agree “strongly”). Even 54 percent of weekly Mass attenders agree at least “somewhat” with this statement.
- Two-thirds of all adult Catholics agree (67 percent) at least “somewhat” that one must make a confession with contrition for the forgiveness of sins. Forty-eight percent agree similarly that acts of penance or fasting are necessary for this forgiveness. More than half (52 percent) agree “somewhat” or “strongly” that by participating in the sacrament of Reconciliation they are reconciled with God and the Church. One in four Catholics agree “somewhat” or “strongly” with the statement, “The sacrament of Reconciliation is only necessary for the forgiveness of very serious sins” (8 percent agree “strongly”).

### ***Anointing of the Sick***

- Fifty-one percent of respondents have requested the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick at a time of serious illness, either for themselves or for a family member. This is more common among those of the Pre-Vatican II (53 percent) and Vatican II (59 percent) generations than among those of the Post-Vatican II (46 percent) and Millennial (43 percent) generations.
- Forty-five percent of adult Catholics say that receiving the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick at some point is “very” important to them. Thirty-one percent say this is “somewhat” important, followed by 14 percent saying this is “a little” important, and 10 percent saying it is “not at all” important to them.
- Sixty-eight percent of Catholics who attend Mass weekly or more often say that receiving the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick at some point is “very” important to them. Twenty-five percent say this is “somewhat” important, followed by 4 percent saying this is “a little” important, and only 3 percent saying it is “not at all” important to them.

- Women are more likely than men to say it is “very” important that they receive this sacrament (51 percent compared to 39 percent). Pre-Vatican II Catholics are most likely to say this is “somewhat” or “very” important (88 percent).

### ***Ordination and Vocations***

- Thirteen percent of adult Catholics have attended an ordination ceremony for a Catholic priest. Among weekly Mass attenders the percentage is slightly higher (20 percent).
- Fifty-four percent of adult Catholics agree “somewhat” or “strongly” with the statement, “Ordination confers on the priest a new status or a permanent character which makes him essentially different from the laity within the Church.”
- Sixteen percent of adult Catholic men say they have considered becoming a priest or religious brother. About one in ten adult Catholic men (9 percent) say they considered this at least “somewhat” seriously (3 percent “very” seriously). The percentage of men who say they considered this “somewhat” or “very” seriously is equivalent to more than 2.2 million individuals.
- Catholic men who attended a Catholic college or university are among the most likely sub-groups to say they ever considered becoming a priest or religious brother (40 percent) and did so at least “somewhat” seriously (26 percent).
- Five percent of adult Catholic men say they have considered becoming a permanent deacon (3 percent at least “somewhat” seriously). The percentage of men who say they considered this “somewhat” or “very” seriously is equivalent to more than 760,000 individuals.
- Fifteen percent of adult Catholic women say they have considered becoming a nun or religious sister (5 percent at least “somewhat” seriously). The percentage of women who say they considered this “somewhat” or “very” seriously is equivalent to nearly 1.3 million individuals.
- Catholic women who attended a Catholic college or university are among the most likely to say they have considered becoming a nun or religious sister (41 percent).
- Taking into account men who considered becoming a priest, brother, *or* a deacon, nearly 4 million adult Catholics, male and female, have considered at least “somewhat” seriously a clerical (males) or religious (males and females) vocation in the Church. Frequency of Mass attendance is *not* significantly related to any differences in the past personal consideration of vocations among Catholics.
- One in ten adult Catholics say they have encouraged someone they know to consider one of these vocations. Six percent say they have encouraged someone to become a priest, followed by 4 percent offering encouragement to become a deacon, 4 percent encouraging someone to

become a religious sister or nun, and 3 percent offering encouragement to become a religious brother.

- Catholics' current frequency of Mass attendance is related to differences in the likelihood that they have encouraged Catholic vocations among others. Twenty-eight percent of weekly attenders say they have encouraged someone they know to consider a vocation as a priest, deacon, religious brother, sister, or nun. By comparison, 9 percent of those attending Mass less than weekly but at least once a month and 3 percent of those attending Mass less often have encouraged someone they know to consider a Catholic vocation.
- About a third of all respondents (32 percent) said they would encourage their own child (regardless of parental status) to pursue a vocation as a priest, deacon, religious brother, nun, or sister. There is no statistically significant difference between the responses of those who have children and those who do not (34 percent compared to 32 percent). A majority of weekly Mass attenders (55 percent) say they would encourage their own child to pursue a vocation.

### ***Lenten Practices***

- Six in ten adult Catholics say they abstain from meat on Lenten Fridays. This is equivalent to 30.6 million individuals. Slightly less than half of adult Catholics (45 percent) typically receive ashes at Ash Wednesday services. A similar proportion (44 percent) say they try to do something positive (as opposed to giving something up) during Lent. Slightly less than four-tenths (38 percent) say they give up something for Lent.
- Nine in ten adult Catholics who attend Mass weekly or more often (89 percent) abstain from meat on Fridays during Lent. Slightly fewer, 85 percent, say they typically receive ashes on Ash Wednesday. Two-thirds of weekly attenders (67 percent) say they give up something for Lent (besides meat on Fridays) and nearly three in four (73 percent) say they make extra efforts to try to do something positive. Catholics who attend Mass less than weekly but at least once a month are only slightly less likely than weekly attenders to observe Lenten practices.
- Among Catholics who attend Mass at least once a month, those of the youngest generation, the Millennials, are the *most* likely to observe Lenten practices. More than nine in ten of these Catholics abstain from meat on Fridays (91 percent) and receive ashes on Ash Wednesday (91 percent). About three-quarters of these young Mass-attending Catholics (74 percent) also give up something during Lent (besides meat on Fridays). A similar percentage (75 percent) makes other extra positive efforts.

### ***Other Religious Devotions and Practices***

- About six in ten adult Catholics (59 percent) have a statue or picture of Mary on display in their home (this is equivalent to 30.1 million adult Catholics). This is most common among Hispanics (67 percent) and among weekly Mass attenders (80 percent).
- About a third (32 percent) say they either wear or carry a crucifix or cross and 29 percent say they wear or carry a religious medal or pin of a saint or angel. Fewer, less than one in four, say the same about rosaries (23 percent), prayer cards or coins (20 percent), and scapulars (9 percent).
- Among weekly Mass attenders, 45 percent carry a rosary and 42 percent say they wear or carry a religious medal or pin of a saint or angel. Fewer, less than four in ten, say the same about a cross or crucifix (39 percent), prayer cards or coins (32 percent), and scapulars (17 percent).
- A majority of adult Catholics, 52 percent, say they pray the rosary. Eight percent pray the rosary at least once a week (4 percent say they do so every day). Women are more likely than men to say they pray the rosary at least once a year (62 percent compared to 42 percent). Pre-Vatican II Catholics are most likely to pray the rosary at least once a year (73 percent). Seventy-two percent of weekly Mass attenders say they pray the rosary at least once a year (23 percent say they do so weekly or more often).
- Nearly half of adult Catholics (47 percent) say that their local parish offers opportunities for Eucharistic Adoration. Six percent say their parish does not offer this and 47 percent say they “don’t know.” Three in ten Catholics (29 percent) with local parishes that they know offer Eucharistic Adoration say they have participated in this in the last year. This is equivalent to nearly 14 percent of adult Catholics or approximately 7.1 million individuals.

### ***Other Religious Beliefs***

- More than three in four respondents (77 percent) agree at least “somewhat” with the statement, “I am proud to be Catholic” (56 percent agree “strongly”). More than half (55 percent) agree similarly that, “I think of myself as a practicing Catholic” (33 percent agree “strongly”). More than eight in ten (81 percent) consider their Catholic faith to be important in their daily life (41 percent say that this is either “among the most important parts” of their life or “the most important part” of their life).
- Eighty-five percent of weekly Mass attenders agree “strongly” with the statement “I am proud to be Catholic” (compared to 70 percent of those attending less than weekly but at least once a month, and 39 percent who go to Mass a few times a year or less). Eighty-one percent agree “strongly” that, “I think of myself as a practicing Catholic” (compared to 53 percent of those attending less than weekly but at least once a month and 14 percent who go to Mass a few times a year or less). Nearly all (99 percent) consider their Catholic faith to be important

in their daily life (75 percent say that this is either “among the most important parts” of their life or “the most important part” of their life).

- Eighty-three percent of respondents say that helping those in need is either “somewhat” or “very” important to their “sense of what it means to be a Catholic.” Eight in ten say receiving the Eucharist is equally important (79 percent), followed by receiving Confirmation (74 percent), living a life consistent with Church teaching (73 percent), having devotion to Mary (68 percent), attending Mass (66 percent), having devotion to the saints (63 percent), and going to Confession (56 percent). In addition, two-thirds of respondents (66 percent) agree “somewhat” or “strongly” with the statement, “Helping the poor and needy is a moral obligation for Catholics.”
- Those who have attended Catholic educational institutions are among the *most* likely to say that “living my life consistent with Church teaching” is “very” important to their sense of what it means to be Catholic. Fifty-four percent of those who attended a Catholic college or university responded as such, as did 49 percent of those who attended Catholic high schools and 46 percent of those who attended Catholic elementary and middle schools. Overall, 37 percent of adult Catholics say this is “very” important to their sense of being Catholic.
- About eight in ten adult Catholics do not doubt the following creedal statements: “There is only one God, a Holy Trinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (81 percent), that “Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into Heaven” (80 percent) and that “Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary” (79 percent). Nearly all weekly Mass attenders do not doubt these beliefs (97 percent each).
- About three-fourths of Catholics do not doubt that “There is a heaven” (76 percent), that “God, the Father, is creator of heaven, the earth, and all we know of the universe” (76 percent), that “Mary, the Mother of God, was immaculately conceived without original sin” (73 percent), and that “Christ will come again at the end of time to judge the living and the dead” (71 percent). Nine in ten or more weekly Mass attenders do not doubt any of these beliefs (90 percent, 93 percent, 90 percent, and 91 percent; respectively).
- Catholics are somewhat less of one mind regarding Hell. Sixty-seven percent of all adult Catholics have no doubt that “There is a Hell.” Seventy-eight percent of weekly Mass attenders say they do not doubt this belief.

### ***Parish Life in a Time of Fewer Priests***

- Only 15 percent of adult Catholics have noticed that the number of Catholic priests has declined in recent decades and report that they have been personally affected by these changes (29 percent among weekly Mass attenders). A majority (51 percent) say they have noticed the decline but say that they have not been affected (54 percent among weekly Mass attenders). A third of respondents (34 percent) say they have not noticed a change in the number of priests (17 percent of weekly Mass attenders).

- Respondents were asked about several things that could be done in *their* parish if they did not have a resident priest. Two-thirds (65 percent) say they would support sharing a priest with one or more other parishes, followed by more than half supporting bringing in a priest from outside the United States (56 percent), increasing the use of deacons (56 percent), and asking a retired priest to do more (55 percent).
- A third of adult Catholics (34 percent) report that a priest from outside the United States has come to serve in the parish they attend in the last five years. Hispanic Catholics are more likely than non-Hispanics to say this has occurred in their parish (41 percent compared to 30 percent). Those attending Mass weekly are most likely to say this has occurred (55 percent).
- Of those respondents who have had a priest from outside the United States serve in their parish in the last five years, a majority, 53 percent, say they are “very satisfied” with the ministry of these priests, and another 34 percent say they are “somewhat satisfied.” Thus, nearly nine in ten (87 percent) who have had an international priest serve in their parish in the last five years are satisfied with their ministry. Only 11 percent say they are “somewhat dissatisfied” and 2 percent “very dissatisfied” with the ministry of international priests serving in their parish.

### ***Satisfaction with Church Leaders***

- More than eight in ten adult Catholics (82 percent) say they are “somewhat” or “very” satisfied with the leadership of Pope Benedict XVI (31 percent “very” satisfied). Among weekly Mass attenders, 93 percent approve of the Pope’s leadership at least “somewhat.”
- More than seven in ten (72 percent) say they are “somewhat” or “very” satisfied with the leadership of the Bishops of the United States (22 percent “very” satisfied). Among weekly Mass attenders, 82 percent approve of the U.S. Bishops’ leadership at least “somewhat.”
- The current level of satisfaction with the leadership of the U.S. Bishops among all adult Catholics is 14 percentage points higher than in a CARA poll four years ago (58 percent).