



Number 8

***Catholic Reactions to the News of Sexual
Abuse Cases Involving Catholic Clergy***

**Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA)
Georgetown University**

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Abuse Cases Involving Catholic Clergy*

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CARA was founded by Catholic leaders in 1964 to put social science research tools at the service of the Catholic Church in the United States.

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Introduction

Early in 2002, the issue of sexual abuse among Roman Catholic priests began receiving unprecedented attention in the national news media. How the nation's lay Catholics were affected by revelations of clergy sexual abuse and by revelations about Church leaders' handling of the problem has been a matter of intense debate since that time. This paper provides a review of evidence from survey research conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University. It primarily summarizes results from ten national telephone polls of adult self-identified Catholics conducted since January 2001.¹

Seven of the ten CARA polls reviewed in this paper were sponsored completely or in part by the Committee for Communications of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), with the express intention of understanding Catholics' reactions to the clergy sexual abuse issue. The first USCCB-sponsored poll was initiated in March 2002, as the issue began to receive national coverage, and fielded during the first two weeks of April 2002. The goal of this poll was to understand how the sexual abuse revelations had affected Catholic public opinion without having to rely on reports and polling of the secular news media. The poll asked about Catholics' awareness of the abuse issue, their opinions of Church leaders' handling of the issue, their perceptions of the causes of the clergy abuse problem, and their support for possible policies for addressing the problem. Several events in late April 2002 led to intensified media coverage of clergy sexual abuse, including a meeting of the Cardinals of the United States with the heads of the relevant congregations of the Holy See. A smaller follow-up poll was conducted in May 2002 to determine if these recent events had caused Catholic public opinion to change.

On five occasions during the next two and a half years, the Committee for Communications commissioned additional poll questions (some of which were conducted as stand-alone polls and some of which were included in CARA's yearly national random-sample omnibus poll of Catholics, the CARA Catholic Poll or CCP). The purpose was to track further changes, if any, in Catholic opinion on the abuse issue and to gauge awareness of and support for measures taken by Church leaders to protect children and young people. Additionally, three of these subsequent polls included shorter interviews with non-Catholics in order to understand broader public opinion surrounding the sexual abuse issue. The results summarized here focus on the attitudes and behavior of Catholics only.

Below is a summary of all CARA polls mentioned here and their sample sizes. A "*" denotes those sponsored completely or in part by the USCCB.

- January 2001. The CARA Catholic Poll (CCP) 2001. 1,890 Catholic respondents (margin of error ± 2.3).
- January-February 2002. The CARA Catholic Poll (CCP) 2002. 2,100 Catholic respondents (margin of error ± 2.1).

¹ All of the polls included both English and Spanish-language interviews, based on each respondent's preference. Calls were made by Opinion Access Corp. of Long Island, New York.

- April 2002. 1,600 Catholic respondents (margin of error ± 2.5).*
- May 2002. 501 Catholic respondents (margin of error ± 4.4).*
- January 2003. The CARA Catholic Poll (CCP) 2003. 800 Catholic respondents (margin of error ± 3.5).
- April-May 2003. 1,319 Catholic respondents (margin of error ± 2.7).*
- October 2003. 1,000 Catholic respondents (margin of error ± 3.1).*
- March 2004. Conducted in conjunction with the CARA Catholic Poll (CCP) 2004. 1,001 Catholics respondents (margin of error ± 3.1).*
- September 2004. 993 Catholic respondents (margin of error ± 3.1).*
- September-October 2005. 1,000 Catholic respondents (margin of error ± 3.1).*

Understanding the Context: Public Perceptions of the Sexual Abuse Issue

The national-level revelations of clergy sexual abuse in the Catholic Church were remarkable because of their timing. Instances of abuse took place over the course of many decades, peaking during the 1980s according to the study conducted by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice (2004). Yet a third of all accusations of abuse were made in 2002 (John Jay College of Criminal Justice 2006). John Jay researchers believe “the only plausible explanation for the number and distribution of the cases reported in 2002 is that individuals were prompted to report abuse after many years by the intensity and detail of the press coverage of the sexual abuse crisis.”

Thus, when examining the opinion of Catholics in reaction to these revelations, what is perhaps more relevant is the *perceptions* of the sexual abuse issue, not the documented or objective reality of when these cases occurred. Catholics’ perceptions have been formed by public reports of abuse and the media coverage of the issue. The exposure of U.S. Catholics to information about the sexual abuse issue depends on a number of factors. Among these are the extent to which they pay attention to recent news reports and other media coverage of the abuse issue and the extent to which they are involved in Church life. Announcements or homilies at Mass, articles in Catholic newspapers, and discussions with other Catholics are examples of ways that involvement in Church life might expose one to such information.

Another factor is the number of incidents of clergy sexual abuse in Catholics’ own dioceses, as this may influence the intensity of coverage in local media. The 2004 John Jay report had estimated that 4 percent of priests in ministry from 1950 to 2002 had allegations of sexual abuse made against them. The supplementary report (2006) indicates that the percentages of priests with allegations do not vary much by region or diocese – ranging from 3 percent to 6 percent of diocesan priests and 1 to 3 percent of religious priests. The John Jay researchers conclude that “the problem was a general problem, not one that could be linked to dioceses in a particular area of the country.”

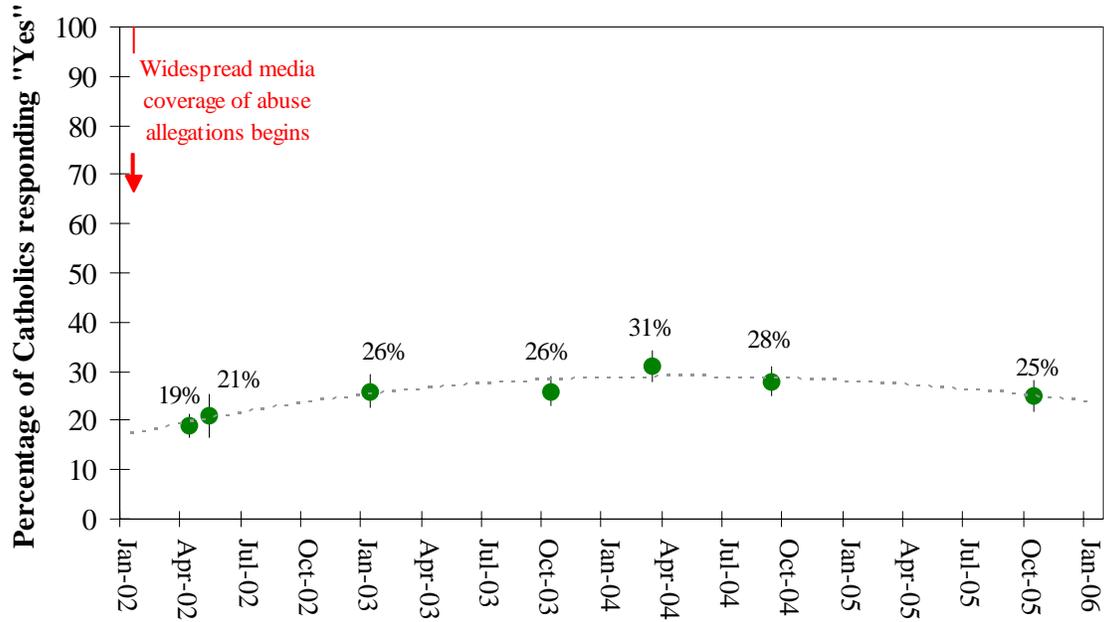
Awareness of Local Accusations of Abuse

Despite the intensity of coverage of sexual abuse allegations in the media, only a minority of Catholics in CARA’s polls say they have heard of a priest in their local diocese being accused of sexual abuse. The proportion of Catholics who say they have heard of a priest accused gradually rose after the time the scandal erupted, from 19 percent in April 2002 to a high of 31 percent in April 2004. Since then, awareness of local accusations has slipped to 25 percent.

It appears that, for a time, media coverage gradually exposed more Catholics to awareness of the issue in their area. However, declining media coverage of the sexual abuse issue in the last two years or so may have led to some Catholics becoming less aware of the issue and in turn less likely to recall local accusations.

***Have you heard of any Catholic priests in your local diocese
being accused of sexual abuse?***

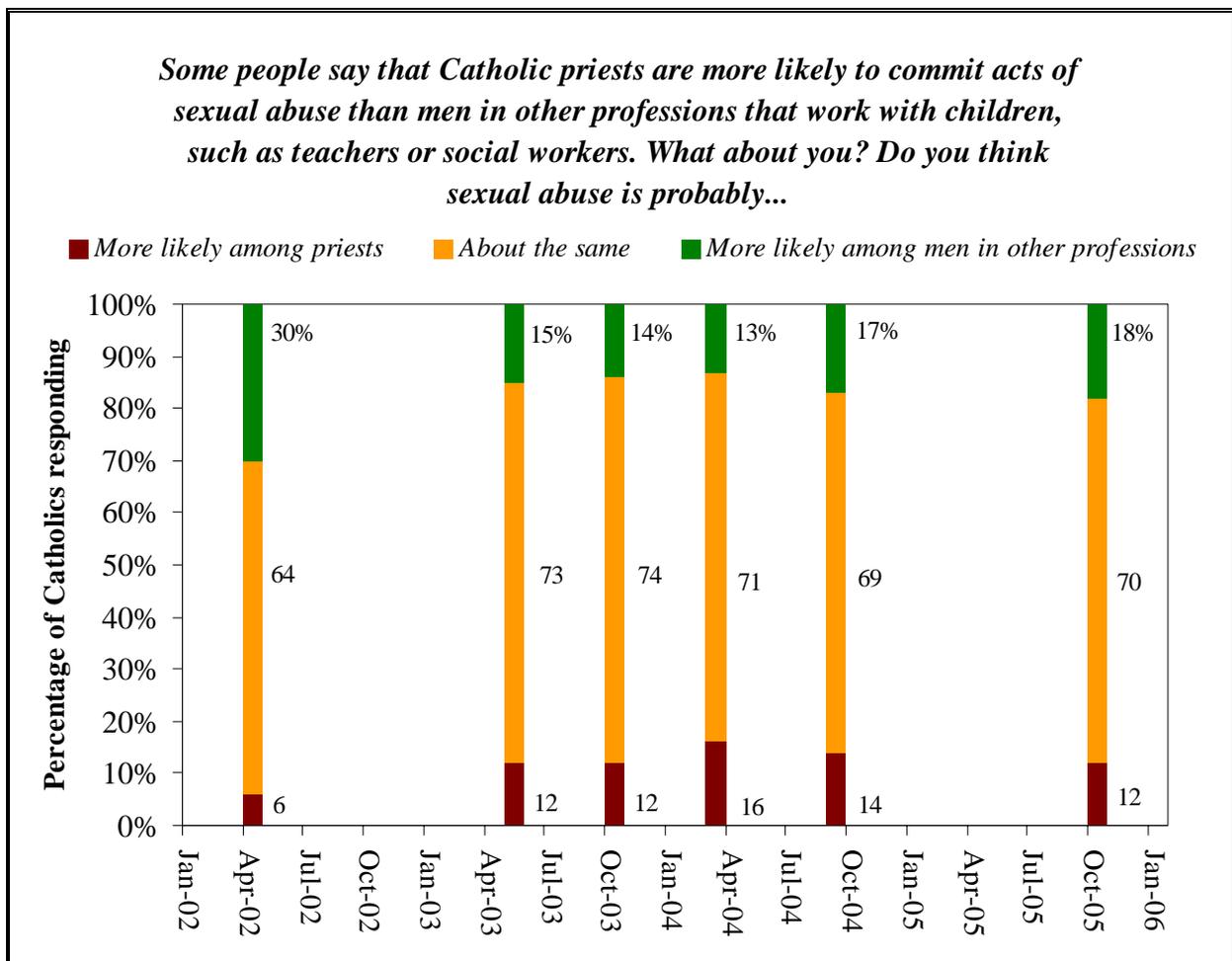
The CARA Polls, April 2002 to October 2005



Note: Bars extending from data points represent the margins of sampling error

Perceptions of the Relative Likelihood of Abuse Among Priests and Other Male Professionals

Since early 2002 Catholics' perceptions about the relative prevalence of clergy abuse have changed. Several of the CARA polls asked whether Catholics think sexual abuse is more likely among priests, among men in other professions that work with children, or equally likely among both groups. In April 2002, 6 percent of Catholics believed abuse was more common among priests and 30 percent believed abuse was more common among other male professionals. In polls in the following two years, these figures nearly converged. Though they have been creeping apart again in recent years, they remain much closer than in April 2002. As of the September-October 2005 poll, 12 percent of adult Catholics believe abuse is more common among priests and 18 percent that it is more common among other male professionals.



A Framework for Analyzing Catholics’ Reactions: Exit, Voice and Loyalty

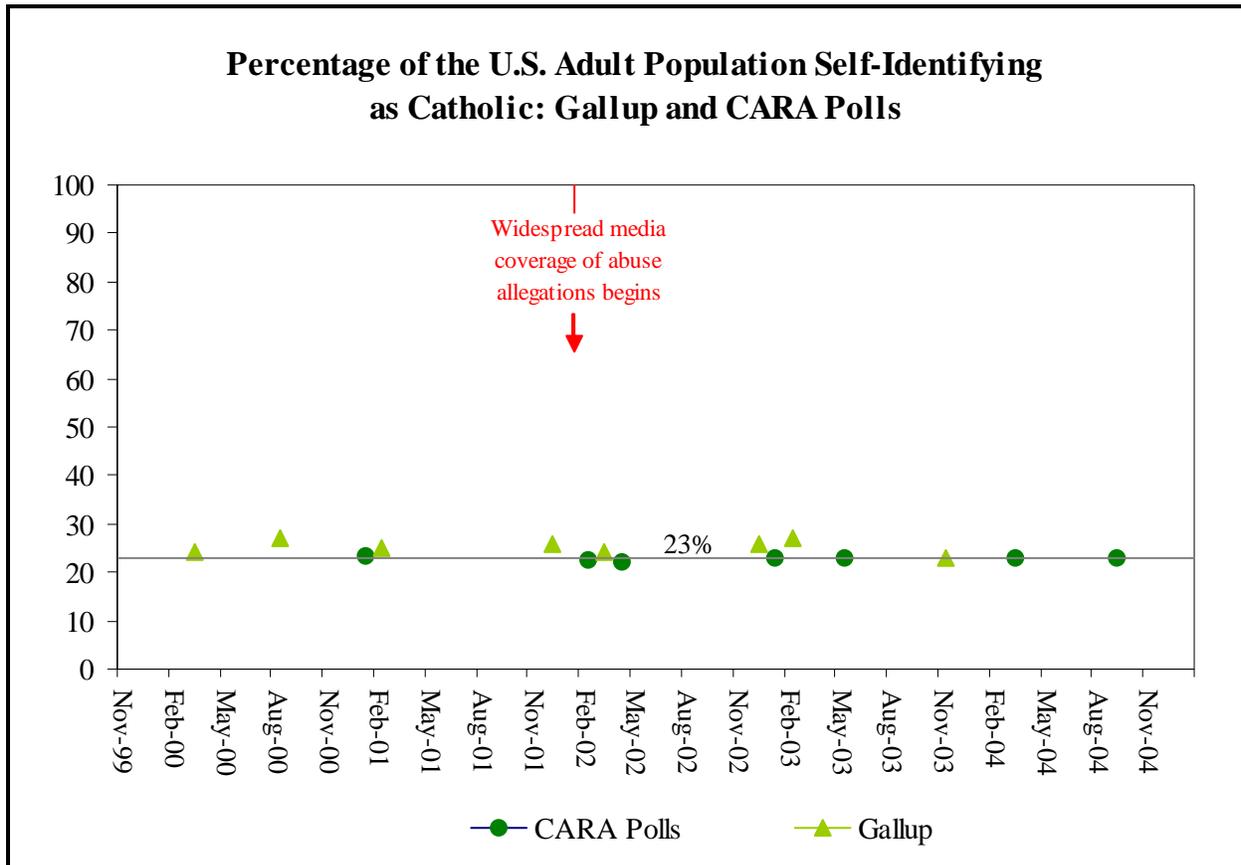
Researchers describe three ways that members of a group can react to negative events within a group, organization, or institution (Hirschman 1970):

- “Exit” – Disconnection; halting or changing affiliation (leaving the group or reducing participation and involvement in the group).
- “Voice” – Expression of dissatisfaction or becoming involved in organized protest.
- “Loyalty” – Behavior relatively unchanged. Members have an expectation that improvement and reform will be achieved by the group.

This is a helpful template for examining Catholics’ reactions to the clergy sexual abuse issue. Analyses presented here look for evidence of each mode of reaction. Evidence of “exit” would be Catholics leaving the Church (i.e., no longer identifying themselves as Catholic) or greatly reducing their participation in Church life (e.g., attending Mass much less frequently or not at all). There would be evidence of “voice” if there were more moderate declines in participation (including decreased support for the Church in terms of financial giving or volunteering) and increased willingness to express dissatisfaction with Church leadership. Though outside the scope of research presented here, other examples of voice would be the development of reform organizations (e.g., Voice of the Faithful). “Loyalty” could be inferred if there were little or no changes.

Affiliation and Mass Attendance

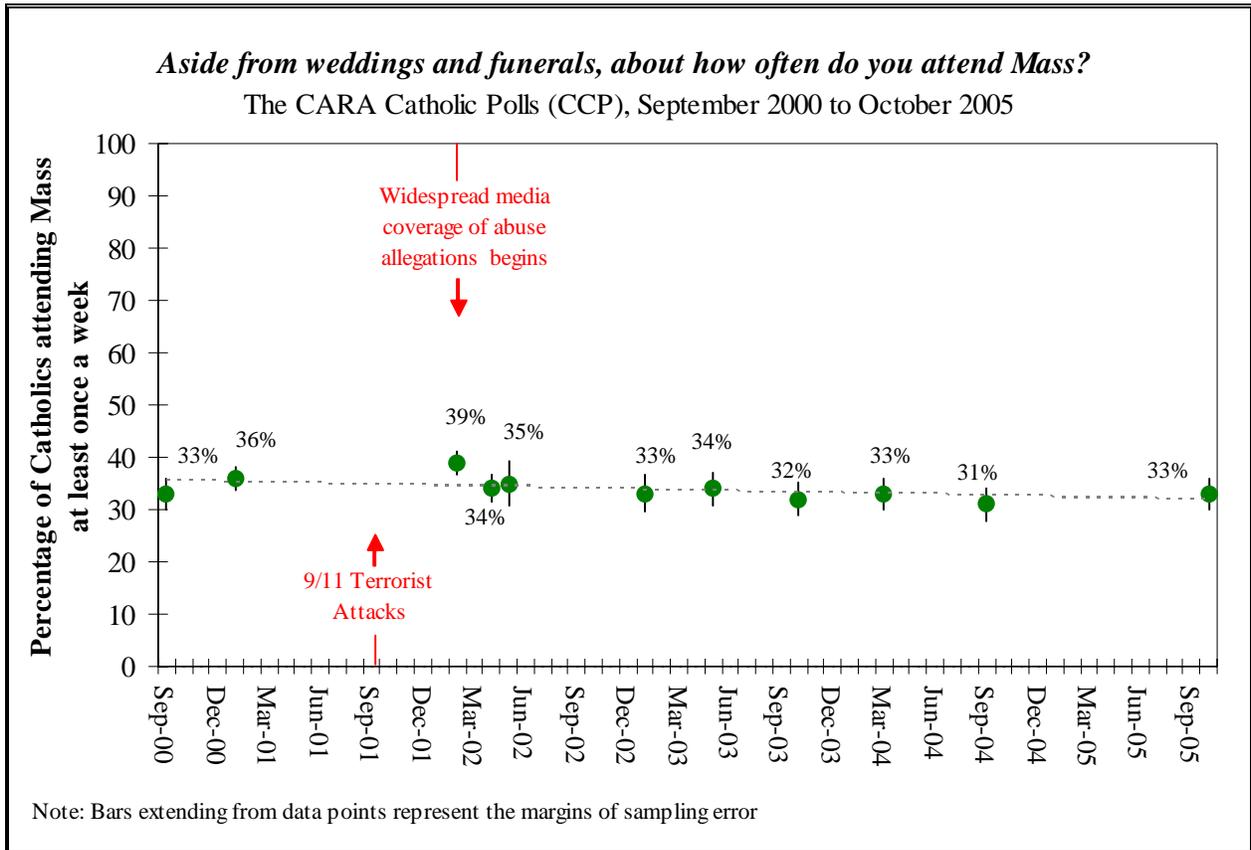
The graph below presents evidence from both CARA and Gallup polls on the proportion of the adult population that identifies as Catholic since 2000. There has been no discernable change, suggesting that the sexual abuse issue has not prompted Catholics to leave the Church in significant numbers.



Gallup polls do appear to show a dip in Catholics’ Mass attendance during the year or so following the eruption of the sexual abuse scandal. The proportion of Catholics saying they had attended worship in the previous seven days dipped from 47 percent in a March 2002 Gallup poll to 41 percent the following December and then to a low of 35 percent in February 2003 (Gallup 2004). It later rebounded to 45 percent in November 2003 and remained at that level in 2004 (Lyons 2005).

In contrast, CARA polls do not show a systematic change in Mass attendance. The CARA polls ask, “aside from weddings and funerals, about how often do you attend Mass?” Response categories range from “rarely or never” to “more than once a week.” The graph below shows the percentage who say they attend every week (“once a week” or “more than once a week”). The highest level of reported attendance (39 percent attending every week) occurred as news of clergy sexual abuse became a national news story in January-February 2002. But this is

a bit of an anomaly – perhaps a factor of the post-September 11 period in United States history.² Attendance levels reported after March 2002 are marginally lower than this but not significantly different from the levels documented in 2000 and early 2001 (33 and 36 percent). In the most recent CARA poll (September-October 2005) a third of adult Catholics indicated that they attend Mass at least once a week. This is the same percentage of adult Catholics reporting weekly attendance in a September 2000 poll of adult Catholics conducted by CARA.³



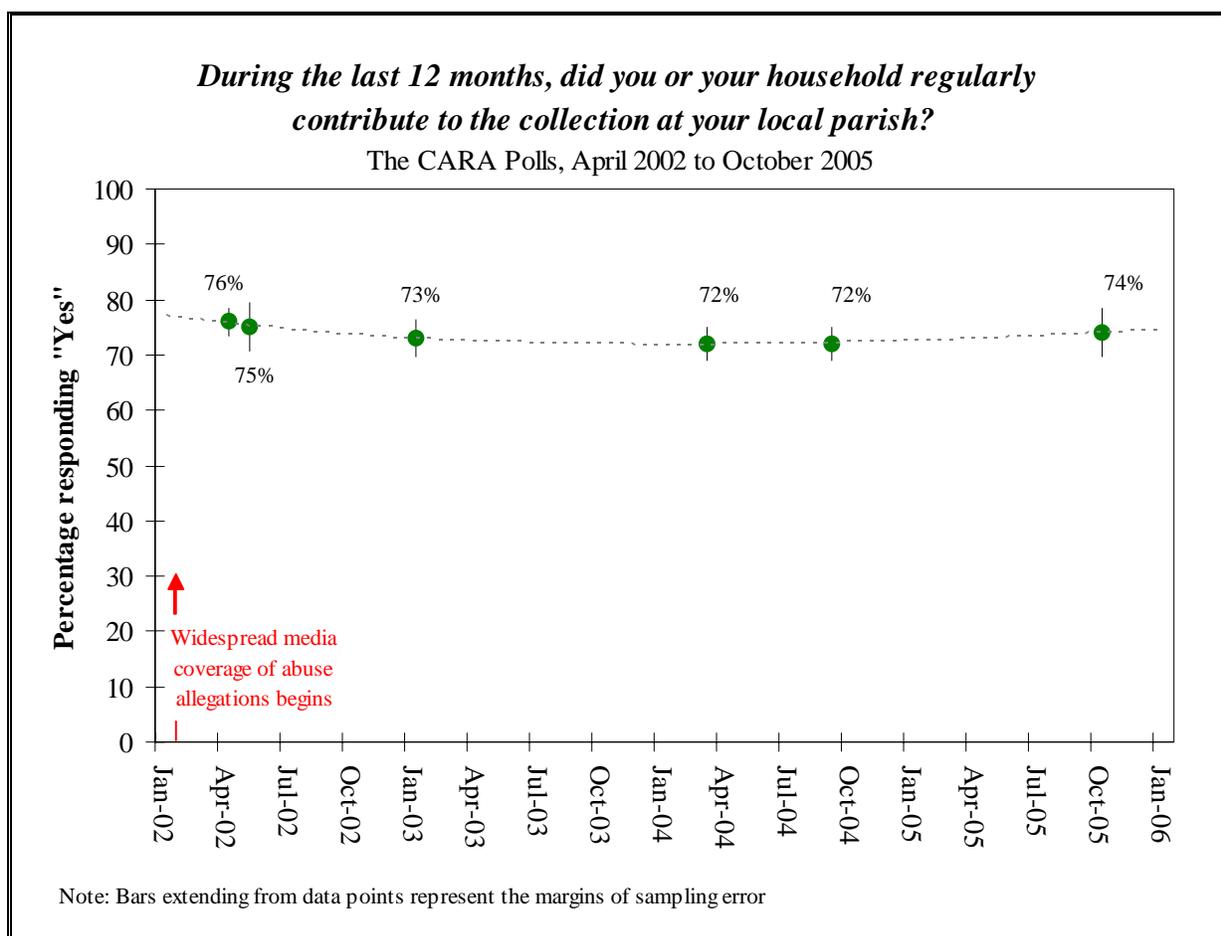
On average, between 2000 and 2005, 34 percent of adult Catholics say they attended Mass once a week or more often.

² It is also possible that an increase in Mass attendance occurred in these months as Catholics in greater numbers sought out information about the issue of clergy sexual abuse by more regularly attending Mass at their parish.

³ The September 2000 national telephone (RDD) poll included 1,190 respondents with a sampling margin of error of ± 2.9 percentage points.

Financial Giving

One issue that has been the subject of much conjecture is whether many Catholics are withholding financial contributions to the Church as a result of the sexual abuse issue. Unfortunately, CARA polls prior to April 2002 included limited measures of financial giving. However, polls since then have tracked self-reported giving. The graph below shows the proportion of Catholics who say their household regularly gave to their parish during the previous 12 months. While this figure was highest in 2002 (75 to 76 percent), the decline to 72 to 74 percent is well within the margin of sampling error. We interpret this as either a very minimal decline or no substantive change in parish giving at all.



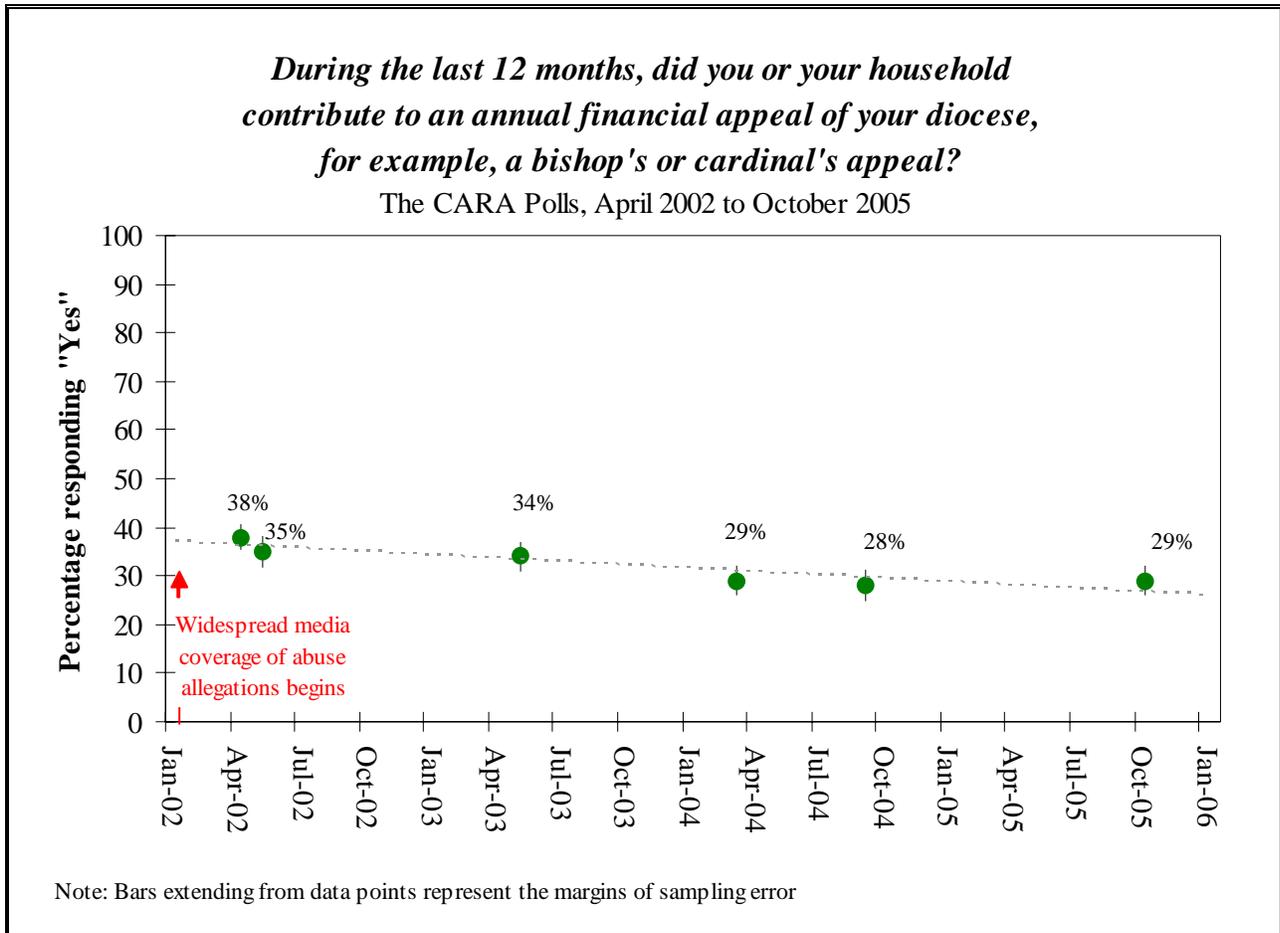
Note that the graph above excludes a data point from 2001 because of a difference in question wording. In January 2001, 78 percent of Catholics said they had given to a “Catholic parish or any other Catholic organization” in the previous year (the word “regularly” did not appear in the question). Thus, while it is possible that parish giving was slightly higher than 76 percent prior to the scandal, the discrepancies in question wording make it impossible to draw firm conclusions.

The table below shows another question about giving. It combines giving to a parish with “any other Catholic organization.” An obvious drawback of this question is that it is not limited to the parish. But an advantage is that it was asked by CARA prior to the scandal in 2001. It was also included in the most recent poll of September-October 2005.

The rate of giving as measured in this question is significantly lower now than in 2001. Note however that the January 2001 poll produced one of the highest levels of reported Mass attendance among the telephone polls conducted by CARA. It is possible that the individuals sampled in that poll simply happened to have been relatively committed and active Catholics. Another possibility is that the wording of this question is reflecting a decline in diocesan giving.

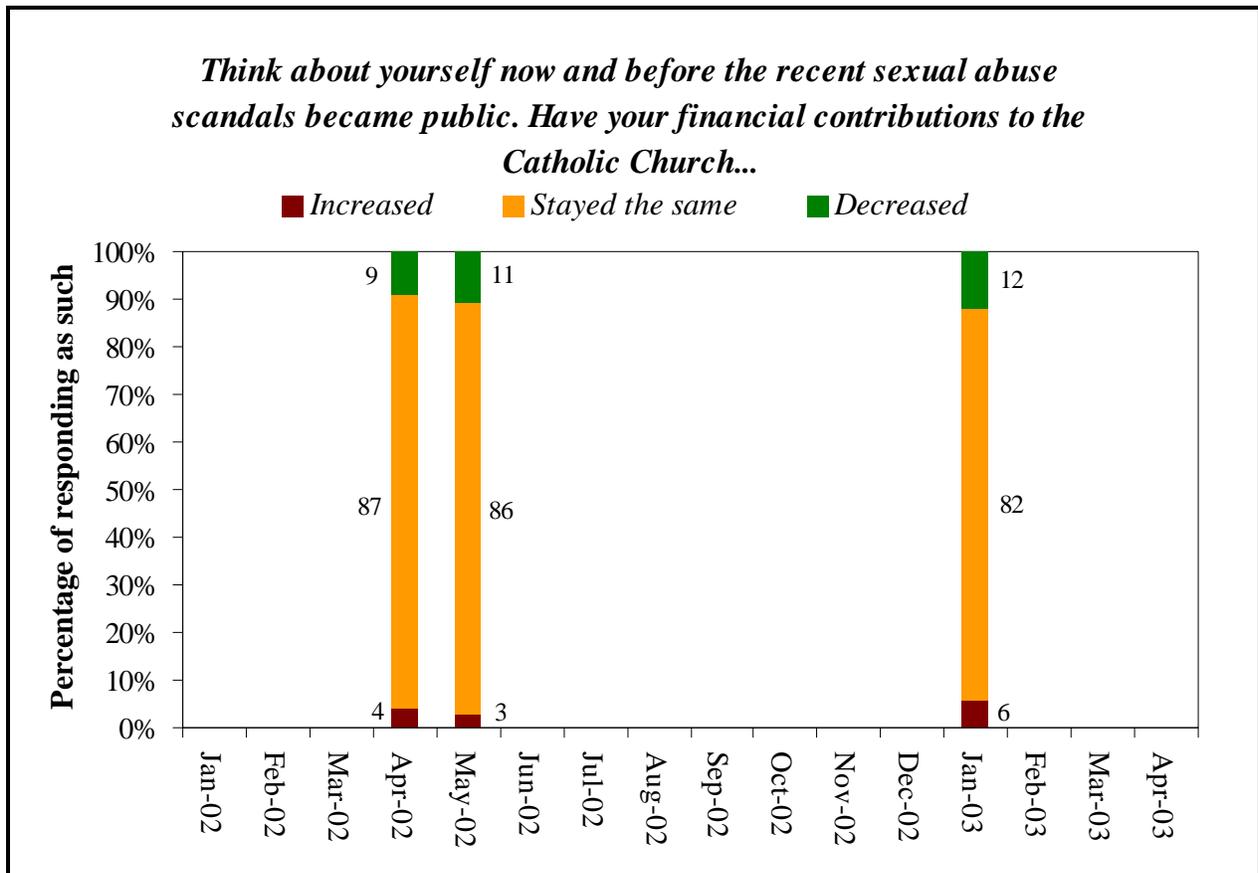
<i>During the last 12 months, have you or other family members in your household given money to a Catholic parish or any other Catholic organization?</i>		
Percentage responding:		
	January 2001	September-October 2005
Yes	78%	70%
No	22	30

CARA polls show a statistically significant decline in the proportion of Catholics giving to their diocese since early 2002. This proportion has fallen from 38 percent in April 2002 to 28-29 percent in the 2004 and 2005 polls.



In a national survey conducted for Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities (FADICA) in October 2002, 19 percent of Mass-attending Catholics reported that they had decreased their diocesan giving specifically because of the sexual abuse revelations. Only 2 percent reported that they had increased their diocesan giving (FADICA 2002). In a follow up survey conducted in December 2004, 17 percent of Mass-attending Catholics reported a decrease in their diocesan giving related to the scandal and 5 percent an increase (FADICA 2004).

Three CARA polls asked a somewhat similar question about “contributions to the Church,” although not specifically about diocesan giving. The results, while not as dramatic as those from the FADICA study, do find that more Catholics say their giving has decreased than say it has increased. In January 2003, twice as many Catholics responded that their giving had decreased than said it increased (12 percent compared to 6 percent).



There is reason to be somewhat cautious about the results of these questions. We suspect that some Catholics who had not previously contributed at all nevertheless say their giving has “decreased.” This may be a way of voicing that they have even less desire to contribute than they did before the scandal.

To avoid this potential problem, an April-May 2003 CARA poll asked about changes in *diocesan* giving in a slightly different way. First, the questions took place early in the survey, before any mention of the sexual abuse issue had been made. Second, respondents were first asked if they had given to a diocesan appeal in 2001 and in 2002. Only those who gave in both 2001 and 2002 were asked if the amount of their gift “increased” or “decreased.” Seven percent of Catholics reported that they stopped giving in 2002 and 4 percent reported that they decreased their giving. Three percent reported that they started giving in 2002 and 8 percent reported that they increased their giving. Thus the CARA findings suggest that equal proportions of Catholics (11 percent each) changed their diocesan giving in negative and positive directions. The difference is that more Catholics stopped giving than started giving. Again, there is tentative

evidence that the sexual abuse issue may have negatively affected the diocesan giving of some Catholics.

It is difficult to determine definitively if the sexual abuse issue is a cause of declining gifts to dioceses. The scandal coincided with a sluggish economy. And some Catholics may feel concerned about the general economic management and well-being of their dioceses in light of recent media coverage of a few bishops turning to bankruptcy protection. The April-May 2003 poll asked Catholics who had changed their diocesan giving whether each of several factors was a reason for their doing so. The table below shows the results.

I am going to read several reasons people may have changed their financial contributions to their diocese. Please tell me whether or not each is a reason your household's contribution to the appeal changed.

Those whose diocesan giving changed from 2001 to 2002 responding:

	A change in your household's income or ability to give	Reaction to the sexual abuse scandal	Feelings about the national economy	Any reason besides the ones I have already mentioned
All Catholics reporting a change in giving	64%	34	33	20
Among those who <i>stopped giving</i>	51%	55	29	25
Among those who <i>gave less</i>	71%	28	15	13
Among those who <i>gave more</i>	76%	35	50	24

Among all Catholics whose giving changed from 2001-2002, one-third say the sexual abuse scandal was a reason for the change. Nearly twice as many cite a change in their household's income or ability to give. (Note that the categories are not mutually exclusive; respondents could identify multiple reasons). However, only among *respondents who stopped giving*, slightly more than half cite the scandal as a cause and roughly the same proportion cite a change in their income or ability to give. This finding supports the interpretation that the sexual abuse issue played a role in declining diocesan giving after 2002. Still, it should be noted that about one-third of respondents who *gave more* report that the sexual abuse is played a role in their increased giving. Generally, the results illustrate the complexity of motivations that play into Catholics' giving decisions.

The September-October 2005 poll asked several new questions about financial giving. Some of these examined Catholic awareness and perceptions of the financial health of dioceses.

One in five Catholics believe their own diocese is currently experiencing serious financial problems. About one-third are aware that some dioceses have recently filed for bankruptcy.

<i>To the best of your knowledge, is your diocese currently experiencing serious financial problems?</i>	
Percentage responding:	
Yes	20%
No	61
Don't Know [volunteered]	18
<i>In the last two years a few Catholic dioceses in the United States have filed for bankruptcy. Were you aware that any dioceses had filed for bankruptcy?</i>	
Percentage responding:	
Yes	32%
No	68

There is no evidence that awareness or perceptions of financial problems in the Church have led Catholics to decrease their diocesan giving.

- First, there is little relationship between the perception that one's diocese is experiencing serious financial problems and the likelihood of giving to one's diocese. Thirty-six percent of Catholics who believe their diocese is experiencing such problems contributed to the diocesan appeal last year. This compares to 32 percent of those who do not think their diocese is experiencing financial problems.
- Catholics who are aware that some dioceses have declared for bankruptcy are actually more likely than others to contribute. Forty-one percent of Catholics who were aware of this gave to their diocesan annual appeal last year. This compares to 24 percent of those who were not aware. Even among weekly Mass attenders (who are relatively knowledgeable about Church events), the figures are 60 and 47 percent, respectively.

The 2005 poll also asked about the importance Catholics place on several factors when they decide whether and how much to contribute to their diocese. Half of Catholics say that three factors are “very” important to their giving decisions: their or their family’s financial well-being, the amount of trust they have in their diocese’s handling of finances, and costs related to the scandal. In comparison, one-third say that the amount of information their diocese makes public about its finances is “very” important.

Please tell me how important each of the following factors is to whether you contribute financially to your diocese and, if so how, much you contribute: very important, somewhat important, a little important, or not important at all.

You or your family’s financial well-being

Percentage of responding:

Very important	49%
Somewhat important	28
A little important	11
Not important at all	12

How much information your diocese makes public about its budget and financial needs

Percentage of responding:

Very important	33%
Somewhat important	33
A little important	15
Not important at all	19

The amount of trust you have that your diocese handles finances properly

Percentage of responding:

Very important	56%
Somewhat important	26
A little important	8
Not important at all	10

The sex abuse scandal or the costs of lawsuits from the scandal

Percentage of responding:

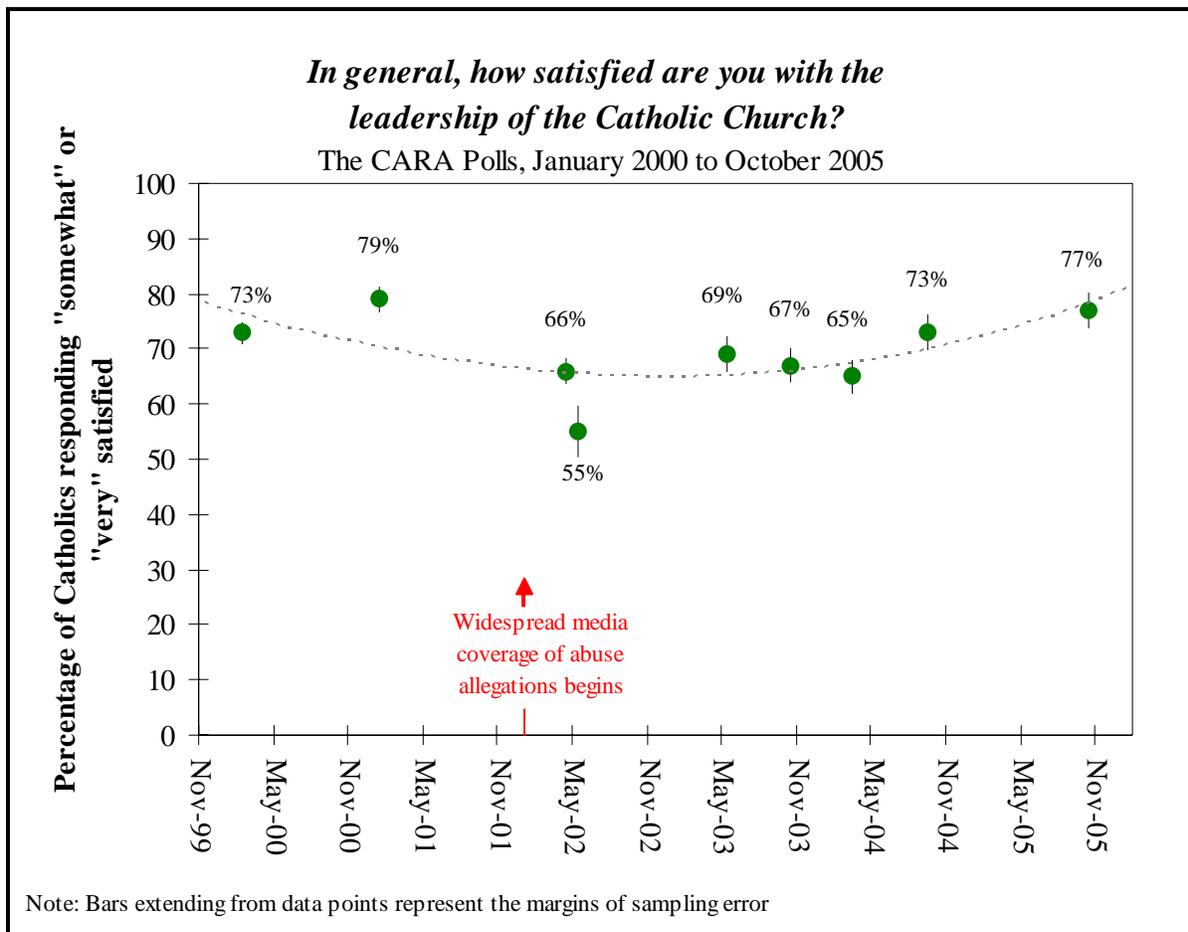
Very important	55%
Somewhat important	19
A little important	10
Not important at all	16

Summary of Findings on Affiliation, Mass Attendance and Financial Giving

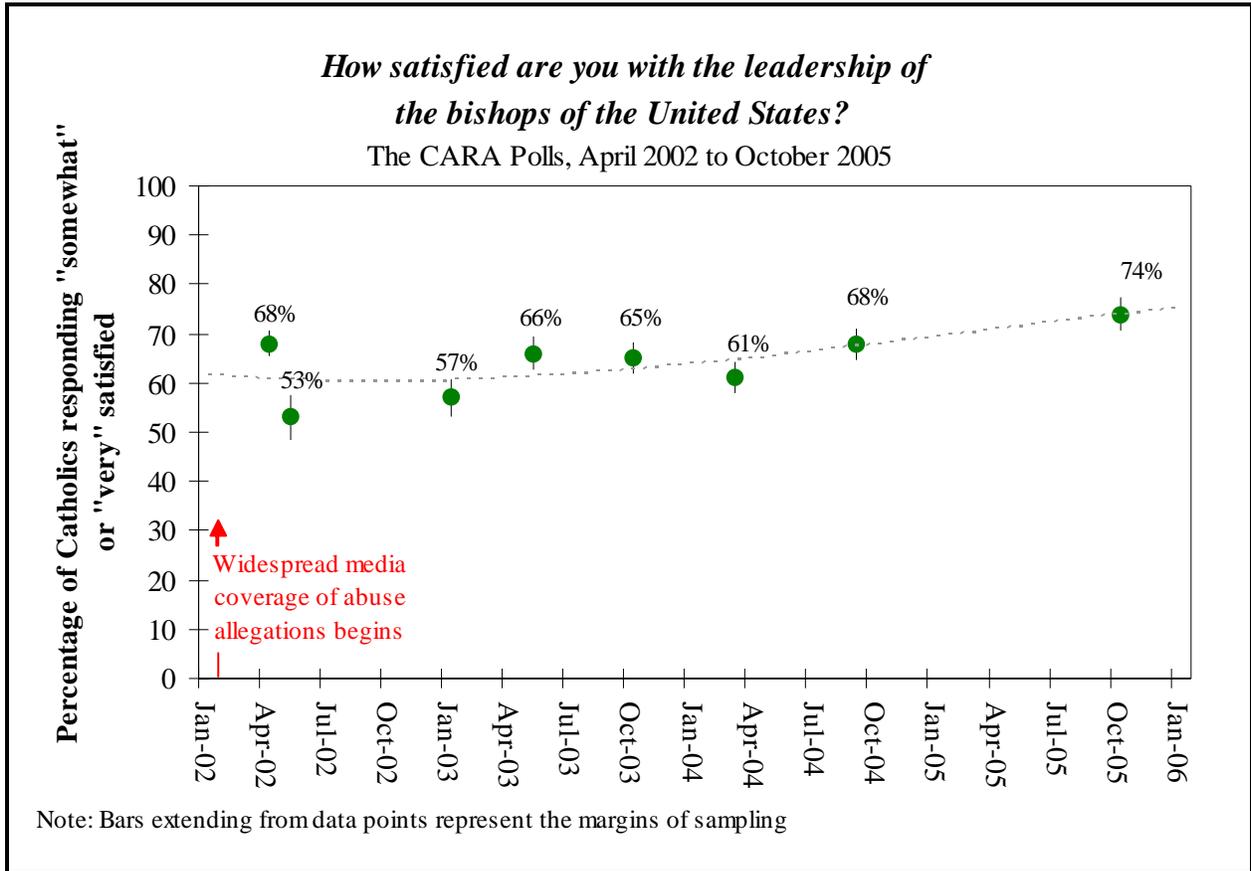
- The proportion of the U.S. adult population self-identifying as Catholic (23 percent) has remained constant since 2000.
- The CARA polls show little change in Mass attendance with on average, 34 percent of adult Catholics saying they attended Mass once a week or more often during the 2000 to 2005 period.
- Nearly three in four Catholics say they regularly contributed to the collection at their local parish during the previous 12 months. Prior to 2002, parish giving may have been slightly higher.
- Respondents' giving to diocesan financial appeals has declined from 38 percent in April 2002 to 28-29 percent in 2004 and 2005.
- In 2003, changes in financial giving to diocesan appeals were more often attributed to concerns about one's own finances or concerns about the national economy than reactions to the sexual abuse cases.
- However, among those who said they had stopped giving in the 2003 poll, a majority (55 percent) attributed this change to their reaction to sexual abuse cases.
- One-fifth of Catholics perceive their own diocese as experiencing serious financial problems. However, this is unrelated to whether they give to their annual diocesan appeal.
- One-third of Catholics say the amount of information their diocese provides about its finances is "very" important to them when they consider whether and how much to contribute to their diocese. Slightly over half say that costs related to the scandal are "very" important.

Satisfaction with Church Leadership

Since 2000, CARA has asked Catholics about their satisfaction with “the leadership of the Catholic Church.” This question can be described as measuring satisfaction “in the abstract” because it does not specify particular Church leaders or particular areas of leadership. Results suggest that Catholics’ satisfaction did decline significantly because of the sexual abuse issue. The percentage describing themselves as either “somewhat” or “very” satisfied fell from a high of 79 percent in January 2001 to 66 percent in April 2002 and then to a low of 55 percent the following month. Since then, this measure of satisfaction has rebounded. In September 2004, 73 percent said they were “very” satisfied, the same as when the question was first asked in 2000. And in the most recent poll of September-October 2005, this rose to 77 percent, nearing the high point of 2001.

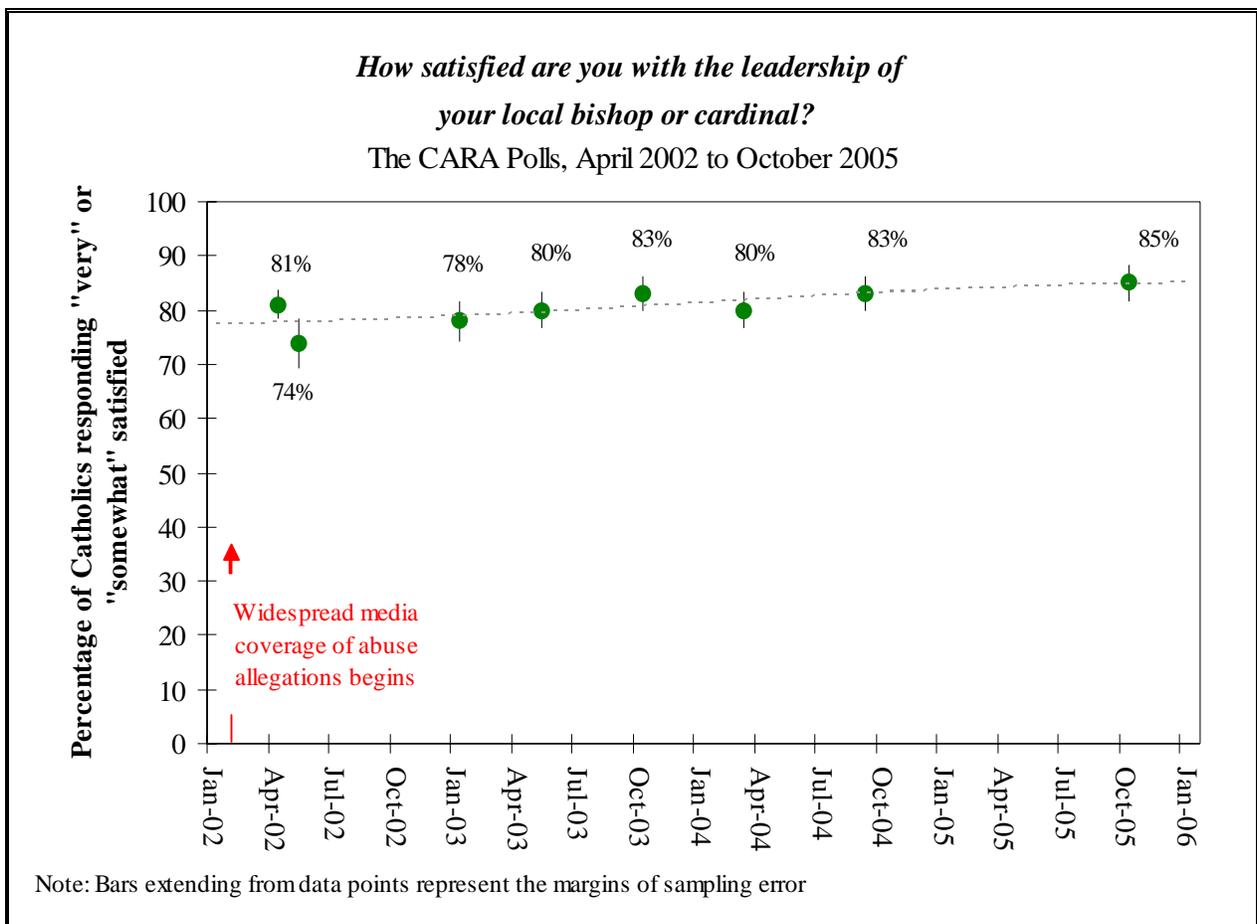


Since April 2002, the polls have asked Catholics about their satisfaction with “the leadership of the bishops of the United States.” This measure of satisfaction also shows a sharp drop from April to May 2002 and then a general rebound. In the most recent poll, nearly three-quarters of Catholics (74 percent) describe themselves as either “somewhat” or “very” satisfied, which is more than the 68 percent level when the question was first asked.

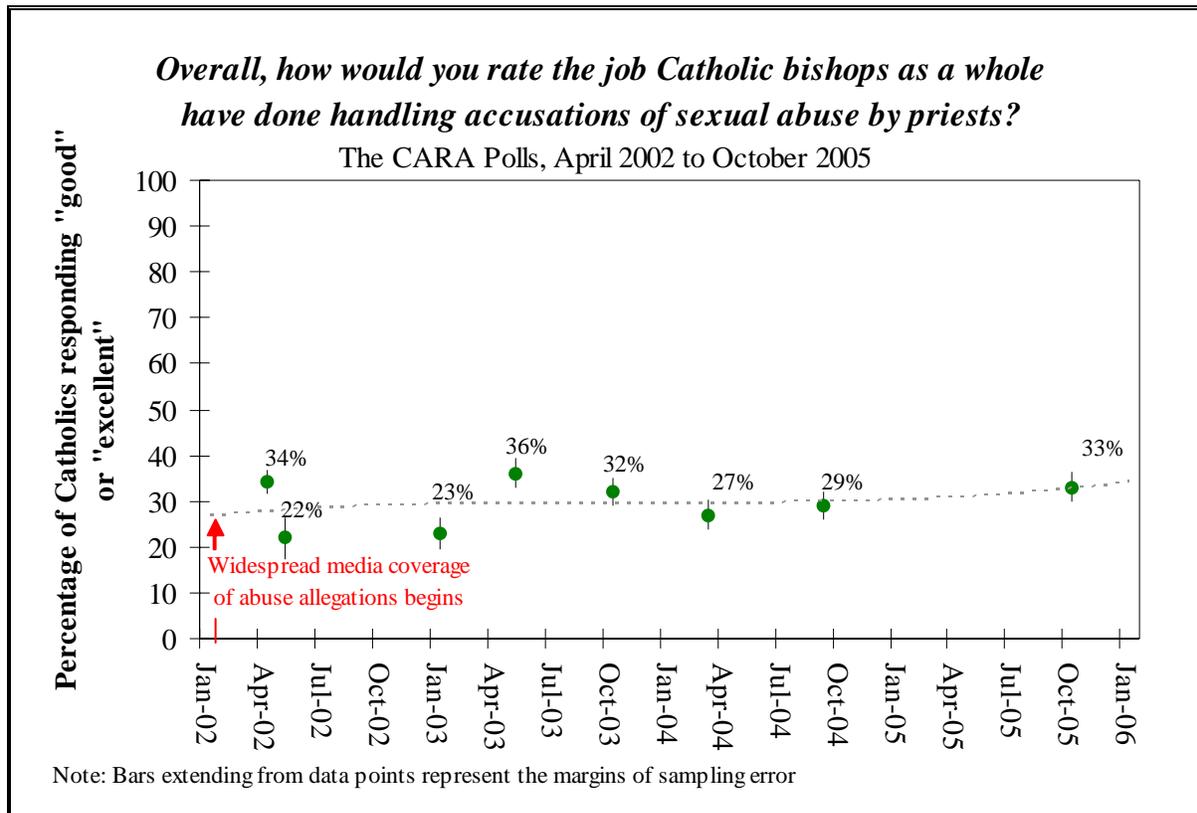


Another question in the CARA polls asks about satisfaction with “the leadership of your local bishop or cardinal.” Changes in this form of satisfaction have been much more modest. As with the previous two questions, there was a drop in satisfaction between April and May 2002, but in this case, the difference is within the margin of sampling error and therefore not statistically significant. The rebound was also quicker than with the bishops as a whole. Since April and May 2003, satisfaction has ranged from 80 to 85 percent, with no consistent upward or downward trend.

Note also that satisfaction with one’s own bishop or cardinal is consistently higher than that for “the bishops of the United States.” This is a pattern often seen in public opinion of professions or leaders. For example, Americans tend to give higher ratings to their own congressional representatives than to Congress as a whole or politicians or representatives generally.

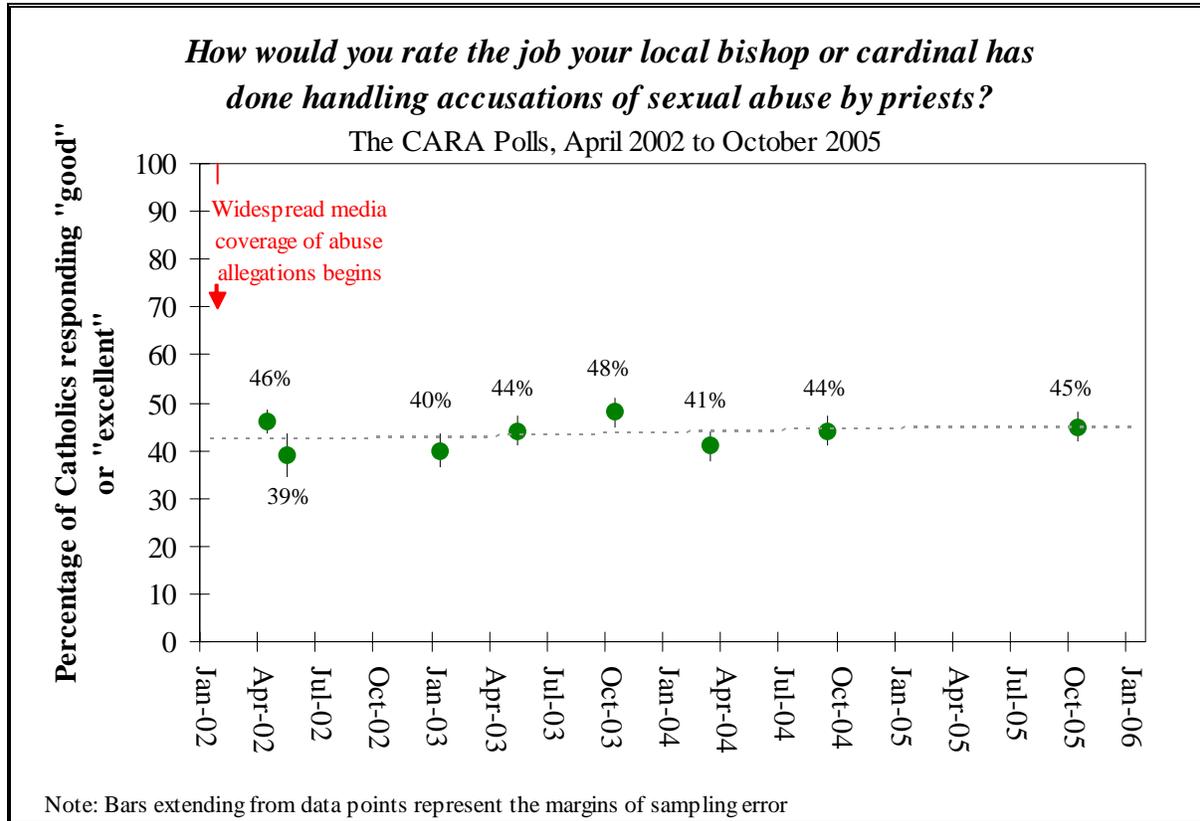


When it comes specifically to the handling of accusations of sexual abuse by priests, only a minority of Catholics give positive ratings (“good” or “excellent”) to the U.S. bishops as a whole. Over time, these ratings again show a familiar drop from April to May 2002 followed by an eventual rebound. Despite the rebound, just one-third of Catholics give a positive rating to the bishops for their handling of sexual abuse accusations in the most recent poll, roughly the same as in April 2002. The findings suggest that most Catholics are not hesitant to voice displeasure about their leaders.

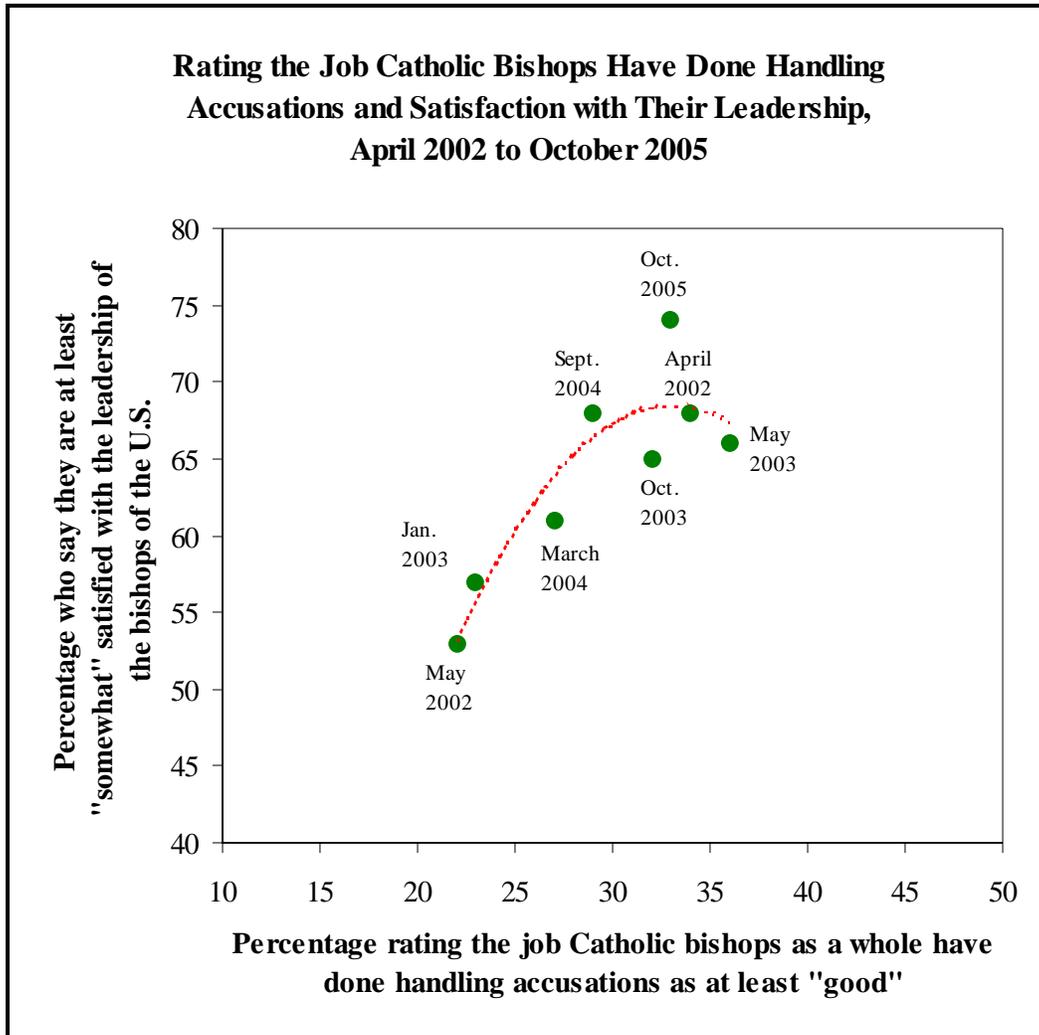


Again, Catholics are somewhat more positive in rating their own bishop or cardinal's handling of the sexual abuse issue than of the bishops as a whole. Still, fewer than half of Catholics rate their own bishop or cardinal as "good" or "excellent" for their handling of sex abuse allegations.

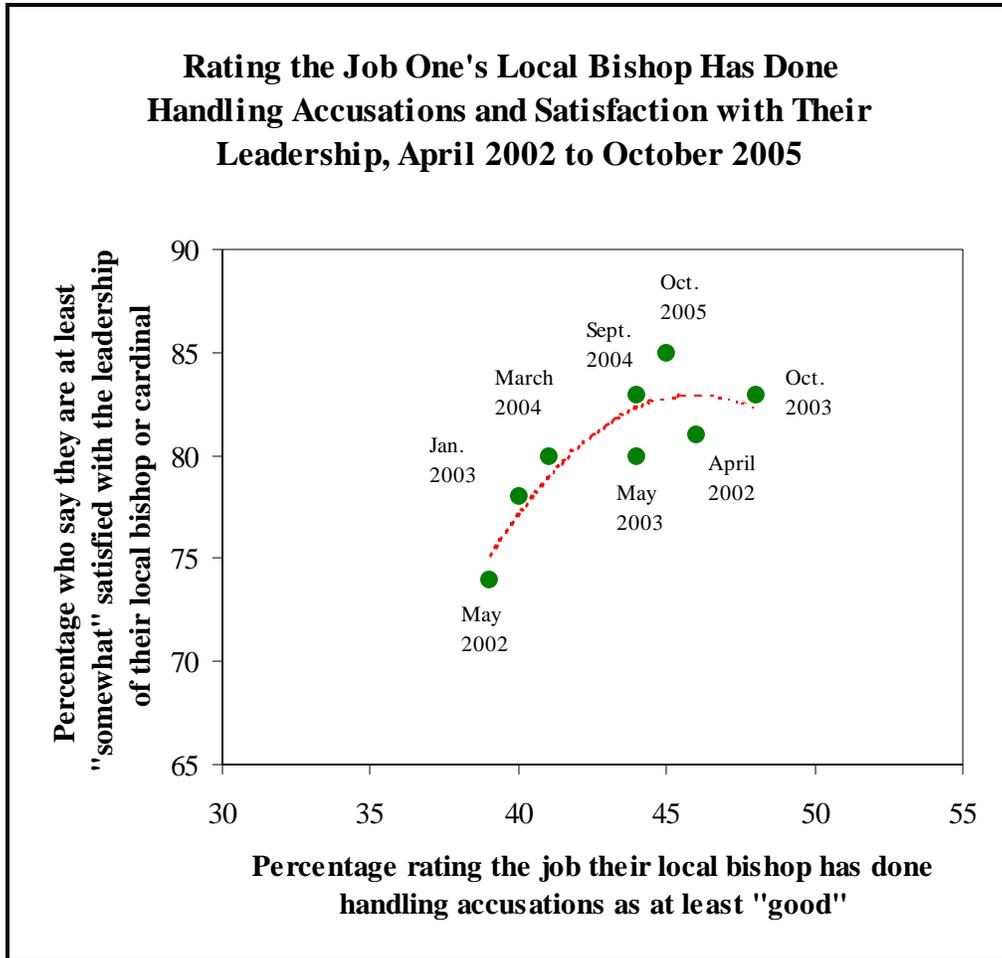
In comparison to the bishops as a whole, ratings have fluctuated less over time, ranging from 39 percent positive ("good" or "excellent") to 48 percent, a difference of just 9 percentage points. Once again the low point of 39 percent occurred in May 2002, but this is not statistically different from ratings at a number of other times, including the most recent poll (45 percent).



Across the various CARA polls, there is a close association between general satisfaction with the bishops and ratings of the bishops' handling of sexual abuse allegations. These forms of satisfaction generally increase and decrease together. This is illustrated in the graph below by the curvilinear pattern created when these two measures are plotted against one another.



As was the case with the bishops as a whole, satisfaction with the leadership of one's own bishop tends to rise and fall with ratings of how one's bishop has handled accusations of sexual abuse. However, as has been seen, there is less variation over time in these two measures.



Confidence in Church Leaders

In the most recent poll, slightly more than half of Catholics report they have at least “some” confidence that the bishops as a whole are addressing the problem of sexual abuse, with about one in five saying they have “a great deal” of confidence. Nearly two-thirds say they have at least “some” confidence that their own bishop or cardinal is addressing the problem. More than three-quarters of Catholics say they have at least “some” confidence that their bishop or cardinal is properly handling Church finances. They are even more confident in their pastor’s handling of Church finances, with more than four-fifths expressing at least “some” confidence and more than half expressing “a great deal” of confidence.

<i>How much confidence, if any, do you have that . . .</i>				
Percentage responding as follows, September-October 2005				
	A Great Deal	Some	Only a Little	None
. . .the Catholic Bishops as a whole are addressing the problem of sexual abuse?	22%	39	28	11
. . .your bishop or cardinal is addressing the problem of sexual abuse?	28%	36	25	11
. . .your bishop or cardinal is properly handling Church finances?	38%	39	16	6
. . .the pastor of your local parish is properly handling Church finances?	54%	30	12	4

Credibility of Church Leaders

Has the sexual abuse scandal affected the perceived teaching authority of Catholic leaders? From 2003 to 2005 a consistent three-quarters of Catholics agree at least “somewhat” that the issue of sexual abuse has hurt the credibility of Church leaders who speak out on social or political issues. Agreement with this statement is higher among those who do not regularly attend Mass. Still, about two-thirds of those who attend Mass at least once a week agree at least “somewhat” that that the issue of sexual abuse has hurt the credibility of Church leaders in this way.

How much, if at all, has the issue of sexual abuse of young people by priests hurt the credibility of Church leaders who speak out on social or political issues?

Percentage responding:

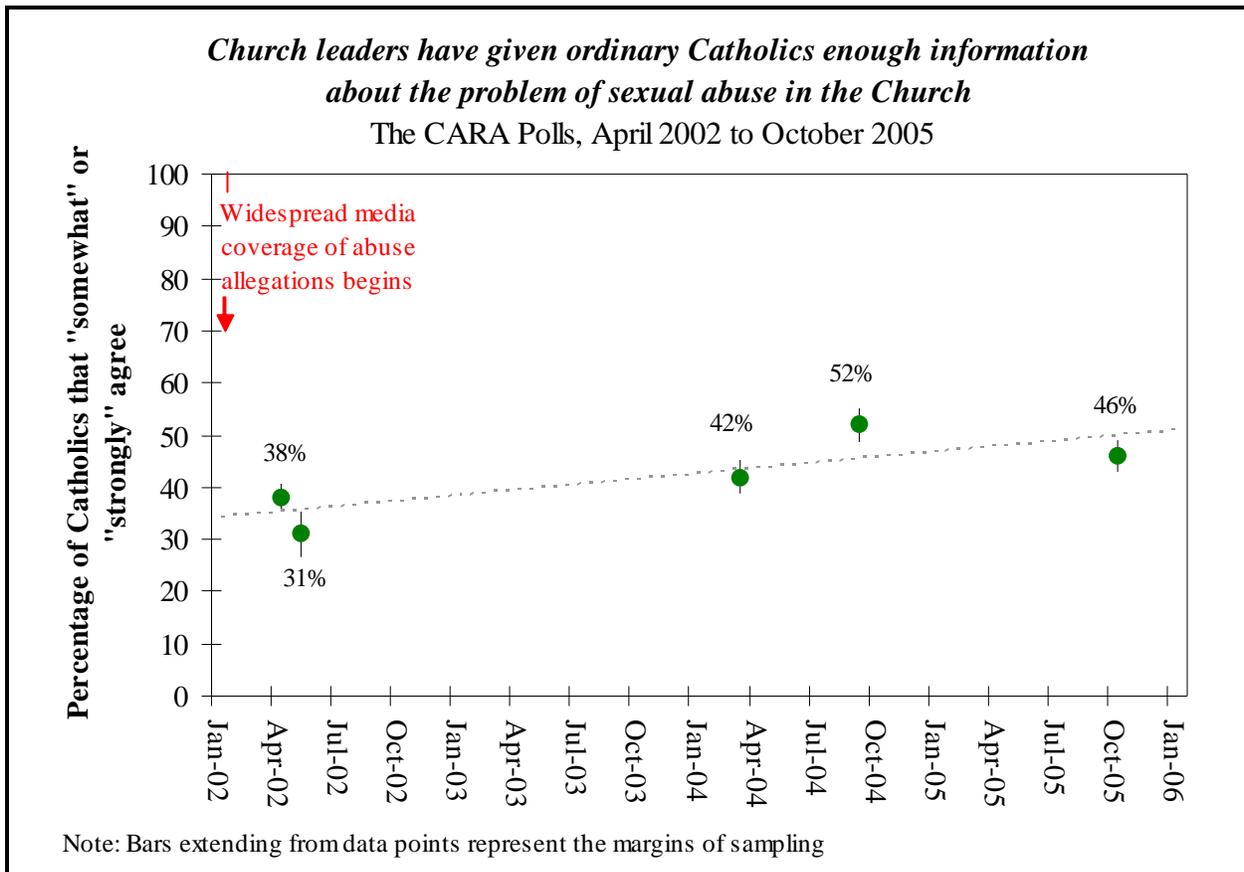
	October 2003	September 2004	September- October 2005
A great deal	37%	40%	42%
Somewhat	38	34	32
Only a little	17	18	15
Not at all	8	9	11

Summary of Findings on Satisfaction with Church Leadership

- For each satisfaction trend, the low point of opinion occurred in the May 2002 poll. This was at a time in which the number of allegations of abuse had increased every month for four straight months.
- Catholics now express greater satisfaction with the leadership of the bishops as a whole and with the leadership of their own bishop or cardinal than at any time since news coverage of the scandal began. Satisfaction with “Church leadership” in the abstract is also at its high point and only slightly below the high point of January 2001 prior to the scandal.
- Catholics attending Mass on a weekly basis exhibit the highest levels of satisfaction for all types of Church leaders.
- More than three in four Catholics express at least “some” confidence that their bishop or cardinal is handling Church finances properly and nearly two-thirds express this same level of confidence that their bishop or cardinal is addressing the problem of sexual abuse.
- Yet, only about six in ten express at least “some” confidence that the Catholic bishops as a whole are addressing the problem of sexual abuse. Three in four Catholics believe the issue of sexual abuse has hurt the credibility of Church leaders who speak out on social or political issues.

Knowledge and Ratings of Church Leaders' Responses

Some Church leaders have tried to respond to allegations of secrecy and perceptions of “cover-up” by being more forthcoming with the faithful about the problem of abuse. In May 2002 only about three in ten Catholics agreed with the statement, “Church leaders have given ordinary Catholics enough information about the problem of sexual abuse in the Church.” In 2004 and 2005 responses were more positive. The high point was in September 2004, when agreement rose to slightly more than half (52 percent). As of September-October 2005, agreement has slipped somewhat to 46 percent but remains above 2003 levels.

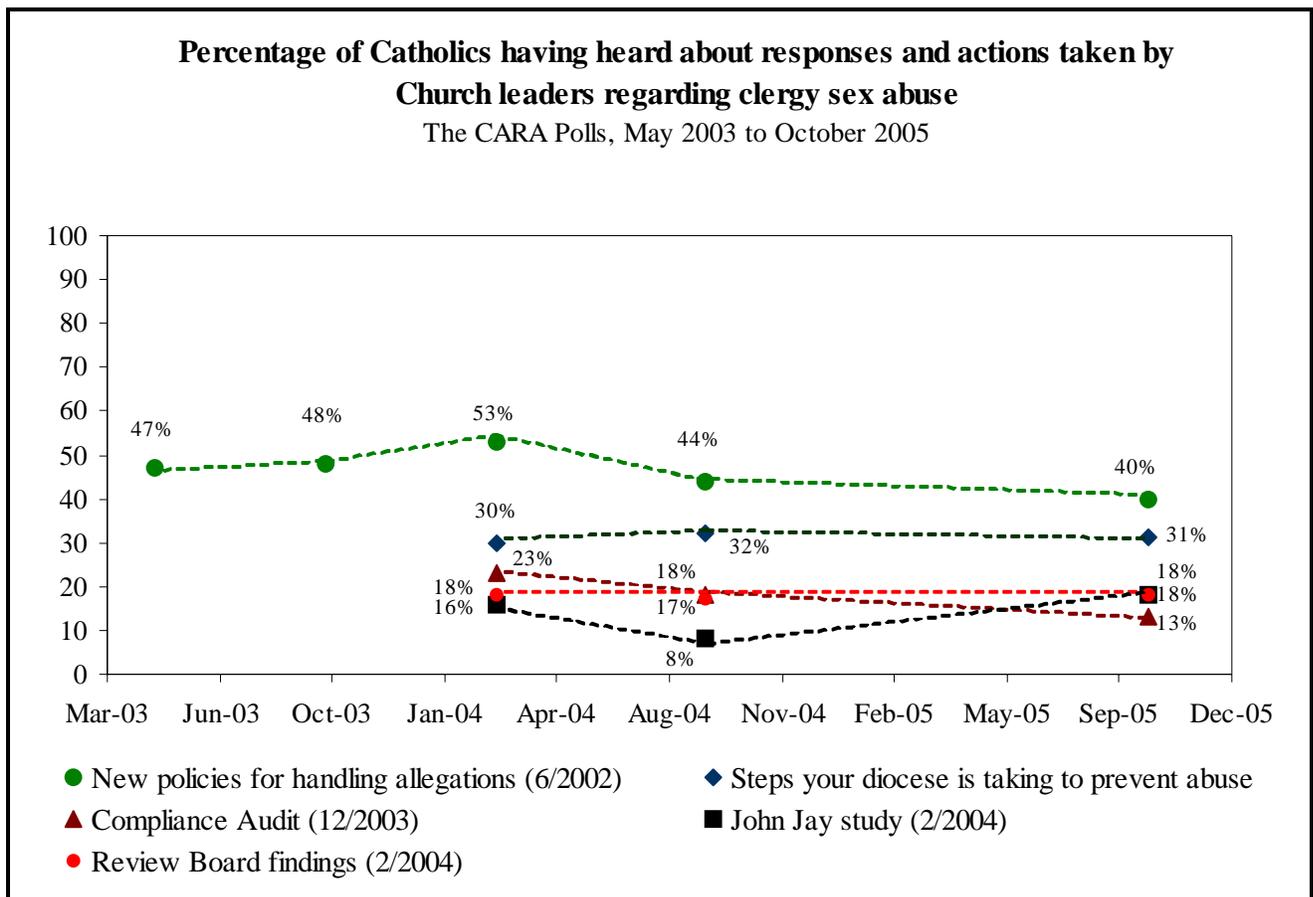


CARA polls have asked about knowledge of four specific ways the USCCB and the National Review Board have responded to the sexual abuse crisis:

- The USCCB’s new policies for handling allegations of abuse (i.e., the policies enumerated in the June 2002 *Charter for Protection of Children and Young People*).
- The 2003 diocesan compliance audit (i.e., *Report on the Implementation of the “Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People,”* released in December 2003).
- The report of the National Review Board (i.e., *A Report on the Crisis in the Catholic Church in the United States*, released February 27, 2004).
- The John Jay College study (i.e., *The Nature and Scope of the Problem of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States*, released February 27, 2004).

Note that the March 2004 poll, which was the first to ask about the compliance audit, the National Review Board report, and the John Jay study, took place just a few months after the release of the audit and just a few weeks after the release of the latter two reports.

In addition, CARA polls have asked whether Catholics know about the steps being taken by their own diocese to prevent sexual abuse of young people. Results for all these items are presented in the graph below.



Slightly fewer than half (47 percent) of Catholics had heard about the Church's new sexual abuse policies when the question was first asked in April-May 2003. It appeared that awareness of these policies might be increasing in March 2004 when the proportion rose to 53 percent. But since then it has declined to 44 percent in September 2004 and to a low of 40 percent in the most recent poll (September-October 2005). We speculate that declining media coverage of the sexual abuse issue has contributed to this decline in awareness of the policies.

- The percentage of Catholics who say that they had heard of the steps being taken by their own diocese to prevent sexual abuse has hovered in the low 30s since CARA first asked the question in March 2004.
- Awareness of the compliance audits, the John Jay study, or the National Review Board report has been consistently lower than awareness of what one's local dioceses is doing to prevent abuse. Awareness of the National Review Board report has remained flat over the course of the three polls in what CARA asked about it. Awareness of the John Jay study dipped during 2004 and then rebounded in the 2005 poll. Awareness of the compliance audits has dropped.

Our interpretation is that involvement in Church life (such as parish involvement or reading a diocesan newspaper) is likely to expose many Catholics to information about what their diocese is doing. With declining media coverage of the sexual abuse issue, however, it may be necessary for Catholics to be actively engaged in seeking information about what is happening at the national level. Clearly, the low levels of awareness for many items suggest that most Catholics are not actively informing themselves about the steps being taken by their leaders.

Does being aware of the various responses of Church leaders to the abuse problem affect Catholics' attitudes? A summary of evidence from the September 2004 poll follows.

Having Heard of the Church's Sexual Abuse Policies and Attitudes about the Bishops' Handling of Abuse Cases

Catholics who have heard of the Church's policies and procedures for handling cases of abuse (44 percent in September 2004) are more likely than Catholics who have not heard of these policies and procedures to:

- Believe that most Church leaders are enforcing the policies (73 percent compared to 52 percent).
- Have at least "some" confidence that the bishops are addressing the problem of sexual abuse (64 percent compared to 52 percent).
- Believe the policies do enough to protect young people (33 percent compared to 18 percent).

Having Heard of Steps Taken in One's Own Diocese and Attitudes about One's Bishop's Handling of Abuse Cases

Catholics who have heard of steps taken in their own diocese to prevent child abuse (32 percent in September 2004) are more likely than Catholics who have not heard of these steps taken in their diocese to:

- Have at least “some” confidence that their bishop or cardinal is addressing the problem of sexual abuse (81 percent compared to 57 percent).
- Say their bishop or cardinal has done at least a “good” job handling accusations of abuse (62 percent compared to 36 percent).

Having Heard of the Compliance Audit and Attitudes about the Bishops' Handling of Abuse Cases

Catholics who have heard of the compliance audit (18 percent in September 2004) are more likely than Catholics who have not heard of this audit to:

- Believe most Church leaders are enforcing the sexual abuse policies (76 percent compared to 58 percent).
- Agree at least “somewhat” that Church leaders have given ordinary Catholics enough information about the problem of abuse (63 percent compared to 49 percent).
- Rate the bishops as a whole as having done at least a “good” job handling accusations of abuse (42 percent compared to 26 percent).
- Have “a great deal” of confidence that the bishops are addressing the abuse problem (32 percent compared to 16 percent).

The March and September 2004 polls asked Catholics factual questions to gauge their awareness of the scope of the sexual abuse issue as documented in the John Jay study. Those who didn't know the answers were encouraged to guess from among the response categories provided.

Respondents were asked how many priests since 1950 have had credible accusations of sexual abuse made against them. A majority of respondents thought the percentage of priests with credible accusations was higher than it actually was. A plurality of Catholics correctly respond that fewer than 5 percent of all priests since 1950 have had credible accusations of sexual abuse made against them. Still, only about four-tenths of Catholics in March and only one-third in September give this response.

<i>To the best of your knowledge, how many priests since 1950 have had credible accusations of sexual abuse against them?</i>		
Percentage responding:		
	March 2004	September 2004
Fewer than five percent of priests*	39%	33%
Six to ten percent of priests	27	27
More than ten percent of priests	24	24
Don't know [volunteered]	10	16
Sample Size	989	982
Margin of Error	±3.1	±3.1
* = correct response		

Only about one in five Catholics correctly know (or guess) that more than 9,000 young people since 1950 have been victimized by clergy sexual abuse. A majority believe it to be lower than it actually was.

To the best of your knowledge, how many children or teenagers have been victims of sexual abuse by Catholic priests since 1950?
 Percentage responding:

	March 2004	September 2004
Fewer than 5,000	39%	41%
5,000 to 9,000	25	21
More than 9,000*	20	18
Don't know [volunteered]	10	20
Sample Size	988	977
Margin of Error	±3.1	±3.1

* = correct response

Thus majorities of Catholics over-estimate the number of priests accused and underestimate the number of victims of abuse.

A question about whether instances of clergy abuse have been more common before or since 1985 was asked in the 2005 poll as well as the two 2004 polls. Fewer than one in six Catholics (15 percent) in the most recent poll correctly know that instances of abuse were more common before 1985.

To the best of your knowledge, were instances of sexual abuse by priests more common before 1985, more common since 1985, or about the same?
Percentage responding:

	March 2004	September 2004	September- October 2005
More common before 1985*	18%	22%	15%
More common since 1985	24	26	24
About the same	51	44	48
Don't know [volunteered]	6	8	13
Sample Size	985	983	976
Margin of Error	±3.1	±3.1	±3.1

* = correct response

Finally, a plurality of Catholics were able to identify that the total financial costs related to sexual abuse fall between \$250 and \$750 million in 2004. But only about four-tenths in March 2004 and only one-third in September 2004 give this response. It appears that most Catholics, though generally concerned about the sexual abuse issue, have not become well-informed about the scope of the problem.

To the best of your knowledge, what is the total cost to date of the sexual abuse scandal to the Catholic Church in the United States?

Percentage responding:

	March 2004	September 2004
Less than 250 million dollars	20%	19%
250 to 750 million dollars *	38	33
Over 750 million dollars	25	26
Don't know [volunteered]	17	22
Sample Size	988	982
Margin of Error	±3.1	±3.1

* = correct response

Note that the percentage of Catholics volunteering that they “don’t know” in response to each of the four factual questions above increased slightly from March to September 2004. This is perhaps not surprising given the amount of time that had elapsed since release of the John Jay findings and declining media coverage of the abuse issue.

Attention Paid to the Sexual Abuse Issue

Despite seemingly limited knowledge about the sexual abuse issue, most Catholics report being interested in the topic. Findings from the September 2004 poll indicate:

- Eighty-four percent of Catholics say they have paid at least “some attention” to the issue of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church (49 percent say they have paid “a great deal of attention”).
- Eighty-two percent of Catholics say they would be at least “somewhat interested” in a story about sexual abuse and the Catholic Church in the news on television, in print, or on the Internet (35 percent “strongly interested”).
- Yet fewer than one in five Catholics (18 percent) say they have looked specifically for recent news about the issue of sexual abuse within the last 30 days.

The minority of Catholics who admitted having little interest in media coverage of the sexual abuse issue were asked about possible reasons for the disinterest. The most common responses are lack of trust in the fairness and accuracy of the media (64 percent), already knowing the necessary details about the issue (58 percent), and feeling that the Church has dealt with the issue and that it is time to move on (58 percent).

I am going to read several statements why some people might not be interested in a story about sexual abuse in the Catholic Church.

For each please tell me if you agree or disagree...

Percentage of Catholics who say they are uninterested in the issue of sexual abuse and agree “somewhat” or “strongly” with each statement, September 2004

I do not trust the media will report fairly and accurately about the issue of sexual abuse and the Catholic Church.	64%
I already know the details I need to know about the issue of sexual abuse and the Church.	58
I believe the Catholic Church has dealt with the issue of sexual abuse and it is time to move on.	58
I do not want to hear more bad news about the Catholic Church.	45
There have not been problems with sexual abuse by priests in my diocese so I am not interested.	36

Summary of Findings on Knowledge and Ratings of Church Leaders' Responses

- There has been a general increase in the number of Catholics who agree that Church leaders have given ordinary Catholics enough information about the problem of sexual abuse. In May 2002 31 percent of Catholics agreed. As of the 2005 poll, 46 percent agree (though this is down slightly from a high of 52 percent in 2004).
- Since early 2004, the percentage of Catholics who say they have heard of Church policies for handling allegations has been falling. In the most recent poll, it reached its lowest point (40 percent). Fewer Catholics, slightly less than one-third, say they have heard of the steps taken by their own diocese to prevent abuse, though this has stayed constant since 2004.
- Levels of awareness of the compliance audit (13 percent), the National Review Board findings (18 percent), and the John Jay study (18 percent) remain relatively low.
- Based on findings from the September 2004 poll, Catholics who have heard of Church policies for handling allegations, steps being taken by their diocese, or the compliance audit are much more positive about Church leaders' handling of sexual abuse allegations than those who have not heard of these. These findings remain even when one controls for levels of Mass attendance.
- In September 2004 no more than about one-third of Catholics correctly identified the approximate percentage of accused priests, number of victims, total costs, or the period of greater prevalence of abuse.
- Between March and September 2004, Catholics became *less* likely to correctly identify the percentage of priests, the number of victims, and the total costs of the abuse scandal to the Church.

Conclusions

The CARA polls provide little evidence that Catholics have exited the Church in significant numbers as a result of the sexual abuse scandal. The proportion of the U.S. population identifying as Catholic has remained constant.⁴ Additionally, the CARA polls show little change in Mass attendance.

There is some evidence of “voice” (i.e., expression of discontent) among Catholics. In the CARA polls, sizeable numbers of Catholics are critical of Church leaders and their handling of the issue of sex abuse in the Catholic Church. One manifestation of this is the organized reform and protest groups that have formed (e.g., Voice of the Faithful). However, the proportion of Catholics involved is relatively small. Some Catholics may be sending messages in an indirect manner by stopping or reducing their giving to diocesan appeals. However, some of this reduction may be related to economic concerns as well.

Although most Catholics have expressed dissatisfaction with some aspects of the Church’s handling of the issue of sexual abuse, most are also loyal to their faith in that they have not changed their patterns of Mass attendance or parish giving. Among the most positive Catholics are those who attend Mass often and those who say they have heard about steps Church leaders have taken to prevent abuse and to audit compliance with these new rules.

⁴ In the CARA Catholic Poll 2003, non-Catholic respondents who reported that they had been raised Catholic (but who no longer state their current religious affiliation as Catholic) were asked the following question, “About how many years ago did you stop thinking of yourself as Catholic?” An analysis of the responses to this question does not indicate any surge in disaffiliation after the widespread news coverage of clergy sex abuse cases.

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