

# Parting of the Ways

## *American Catholics and their priests*

By Susan Pinkus and Peter McDonough

First of two parts

The scandal of sexual abuse and clerical cover-up has prompted a number of opinion polls on how American Catholics view their church and its leaders. However, surveys of the priests themselves are rare. A national study conducted by the *Los Angeles Times* in the late summer and fall of 2002 was the only one to assess the attitudes of priests after their bishops, meeting in June in Dallas, issued a “charter” for dealing with cases of sexual abuse of children.

Our analysis draws on the *LA Times* study as the source of the most recent information concerning the preferences and perceptions of Catholic priests about issues raised by the scandal.

Two sets of questions are at the core of our observations. How do the attitudes of priests stack up against those of ordinary Catholics? The answer, as we’ll see, is reasonably straightforward because of the abundance of data available from various surveys of the laity.

The second set of questions, to be addressed in the May/June issue of *Public Perspective*, is more complicated. The days when Catholicism could be considered a doctrinal monolith are gone. What are the key divisions among priests themselves? And how do rank-and-file clerics view their bishops? It turns out that conflicts among insid-

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ers—rifts within the church’s leadership and middle management—are as prominent as the differences between the clergy and lay “outsiders.” And what may be even more ominous than these internal divisions are doubts, widely shared among priests of all ages and ideological dispositions, regarding the venerable tradition of an exclusively male clergy.

To begin to answer the first question, one must start with studies that show American Catholics today have become less rigid in their beliefs in recent decades, embracing a selective adherence to church teachings. They are more into picking and choosing what works in their lifestyles and what they see as important to their individual needs.

Nearly 40% of America’s 60 million Catholics are between the ages of 20 and 39. In a 1998 article in *Commonweal* magazine, William Dinges, Dean R. Hoge, Mary Johnson, and Juan L. Gonzales Jr., who conducted a 1997 survey of young adult Catholics in 44 parishes, described this age group as

...a large segment of the twenty million or so Catholics who appear disconnected from their tradition, who do not attend Mass regularly or have no official parish connection. Many are less committed to institutional Catholicism, more likely to be disconnected from the church’s traditions, less aware of God’s presence in their lives, less knowledgeable about the church’s teachings... more selective in appropriating doctrine and discipline and more imbued with the

American Lone Ranger approaches to spirituality.

Many priests concur with this assessment of their congregants. When asked the greatest problems faced as practicing Catholics by the laity with whom they come into contact, they mention their lack of faith, inadequate religious education in general, and apathy and indifference toward the church and religion.

Priests who took their vows during the era after the Second Vatican Council (in the 1960s and ’70s) are more accepting of the laity’s views. But many of these clerics are no longer active ministers or are nearing retirement.

### Study Note

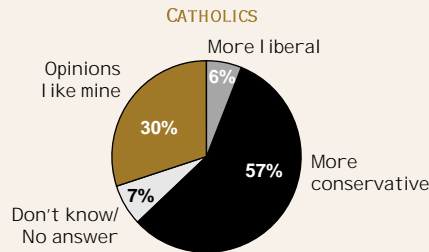
The 2002 *Los Angeles Times* survey of Roman Catholic priests was conducted by means of mail-ballot questionnaires between July 27 and October 11. Questionnaires were returned by 1,854 active and retired priests across the United States and Puerto Rico. Information on the process used to select the priests who were sent ballots is available from the *Los Angeles Times*.

In this article, priests who are referred to as “religiously liberal” are those who said their views on most matters having to do with religious beliefs and moral doctrines were very or somewhat liberal (30%). Moderates are those who said their views were “middle-of-the-road” (37%), and conservatives described their religious and moral views as somewhat or very conservative (28%).

Figure 1  
**Perceptions of the Pope**

**Question:**

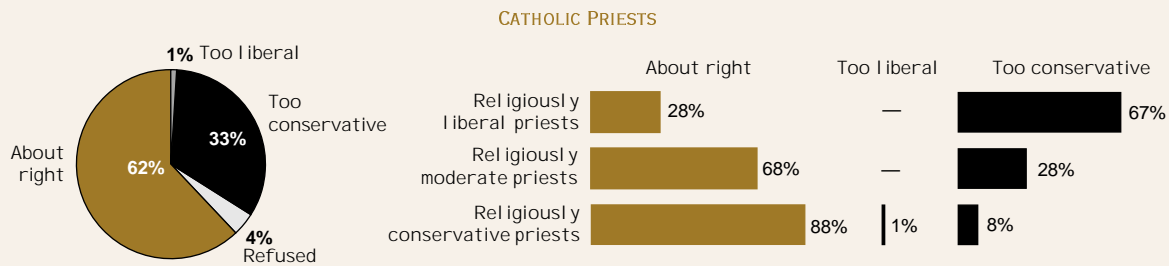
When it comes to issues of personal morality, would you say that Pope John Paul is more liberal than you, or more conservative than you, or are his opinions pretty much like yours?



Source: Survey by CBS News/*New York Times*, April 28-May 1, 2002.

**Question:**

In your opinion, are Pope John Paul II's views on moral issues generally too liberal, too conservative or about right?



Source: Survey by *Los Angeles Times*, July 27-October 11, 2002.

The church is in crisis not just because of the sex abuse scandal, but over the shortage of priests due to age and the decline in the number of men entering the seminary. Whereas there were 57,000 active priests in 1985, today there are only 46,000, according to the US Conference of Catholic Bishops. Only 8% of priests today are 40 years of age or less, while a third are over 70 (55% are over 60).

At the same time, the institutional church has shifted theologically during John Paul II's papacy to a much more conservative view of Catholicism. Because of this tilt, the men currently being attracted to the priesthood are also more conservative. Conversely, many more young people who could have the "calling" are shying away from

this vocation because of the conservative trend. Those now entering the seminaries are more theologically conservative than their older brethren and are not as forgiving as the older priests toward the Catholic laity they serve. The effect is to cause the priesthood to drift farther away from the laity.

One sees this divide in many surveys. More than half of Catholics in an April 28-May 1, 2002, CBS News/*New York Times* poll said that the church was out of touch with the needs of Catholics today. Almost three-fifths also believed that the pope was more conservative than they were (see Figure 1).

But many of the priests surveyed in the *LA Times* poll did not see the pope that

way. More than three-fifths believed John Paul's views on moral issues were just right, while a third thought him too conservative. (But two-thirds of religiously liberal priests said the pope's views were too conservative, while virtually all religiously conservative priests thought they were just about right.)

Would permitting marriage help the church attract more young people—perhaps with less conservative views—to the priesthood? Would the church then become better aligned with the lay people it serves? A full 69% of priests favored the ordination of married priests in 2002—up a significant 10 points since the *LA Times* asked priests this question in 1994. Thirty-six percent said the most compelling reason for allowing it was to help re-

duce the shortage of priests, while 31% said it would make the priesthood more representative of the laity.

Priests and laity were in agreement on the question of allowing priests to get married—71% of Catholics in the CBS News/*New York Times* poll supported the idea. They were far apart, however, on the question of ordaining women. While 63% of Catholics supported it, only 46% of priests did.

The priests' survey shows the Roman Catholic Church is especially out of step with American Catholics in matters of what one Jesuit cleric describes as "pelvic theology." Almost two-thirds of priests surveyed said that on moral issues, such as sexuality, marriage and reproduction, the laity was going its own way.

Differences in opinion between priests and laity support this view. For example, nine in ten priests said it was always (71%) or often (19%) a sin for a woman to get an abortion. But in a June 2000 *LA Times* poll, nearly half of Catholics said abortion should always be legal, while another 45% said it should be illegal, with exceptions for cases of rape, incest and to save the life of the mother. Just 7% of this group said abortion should always be illegal, with no exceptions.

Further illustrating the divide were the 53% of priests who thought the use of artificial birth control by married couples was either always or often a sin, while opposite views were held by the laity. Seven in ten disagreed with the church's teachings on birth control, according to the CBS News/*New York Times* poll.

In a 1998 article in *America* magazine, Hoge described the dissonance:

Today, church teachings about birth control are ignored by most Catholics, since thoughtful Catholic lay people find the teachings unconvincing. They

consider this a non-issue. Another non-issue is the teachings about premarital sex.

This "cafeteria Catholicism" form of religion that fits the laity's lifestyle is accepted by many priests. Nearly two out of three in the *LA Times* survey said that Catholics did not have to follow all of the church's teachings to be faithful to the church, while more than a third believed the opposite.

Most religiously liberal and many religiously

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moderate priests believed the laity might disagree on some issues and still be considered faithful (91% and 59%, respectively), while most religiously conservative priests (64%) believed the laity had to follow all of the teachings to be faithful to the church.

Priests are well aware of the differences between the institutional church and the laity, and many believe the faithful should be part of the solution. Among the more than three-quarters who said reform within the church was needed, a fifth suggested an increase in lay involvement or an effort to empower the laity. A fifth also mentioned the democratization or decentralization of the church as a priority.

In a March 2002 ABC News/*Washington Post* poll, 54% of Catholics thought the church should do more to involve the laity in deciding church policies and practices. "Catholics (in all age groups) agreed on the desirability of democracy in Catholicism at the levels

of parish, diocese and the Vatican," wrote Hoge in a 1999 article in *America*, citing a May 1999 Gallup survey of self-described Catholics conducted for Catholic University:

All Catholics agreed that the laity should be permitted to participate in decisions about spending parish money and in writing church teachings about economic justice and world peace. Related to this, a statement saying that lay people are

just as important as priests received the same high level of assent in all age groups.

Whether and to what extent the lay Catholics will be allowed to participate in addressing the problems facing their church may well depend on which problems are being faced.

When asked in the *LA Times* poll what they thought the most important problems were, priests cited the aging clergy and shortage of priests first (25%), followed by problems with bishops and the church's hierarchy (20%), child abuse by clergy (18%) and restoring credibility to priests (13%). About seven in ten believed that the sex abuse scandal was the biggest crisis for the church in the last century, and that the bishops had handled it poorly.

More on that topic, and on how priests view the church and its hierarchy, will appear in the next issue of *Public Perspective*.