

CATHOLICS IN THE U.S.: THE NEXT GENERATION

By Dean R. Hoge

Survey research on young Catholics gives us some idea of what changes are likely in American Catholicism in years ahead. The young adults are more individualistic and more "American" than at any time in history. To understand the present we need to glance backward in time.

Assimilation and Americanization

The vast majority of today's Catholics are the descendants of immigrants who arrived sometime between the Civil War and 1925. Catholic immigration peaked in 1890 to 1920, when it halted due to changes in immigration laws. These newcomers felt ill at ease in America, due to the prejudice against them. The resident Protestants did not welcome them or trust them. Therefore the Catholics stuck together for mutual support and defense, building an impressive network of their own parishes, schools, and societies.

Everything changed in the 1960s. John F. Kennedy was elected President, proving to all that Catholics are full-fledged Americans and capable of national leadership. Pope John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council, which met from 1962 to 1965 and ushered in numerous changes making the Church more respected by the American mentality — endorsing religious freedom, supporting ecumenism, and empowering the laity. The events of the sixties affected youth most of all, and today these same people are in their forties. They are now the most liberal portion of American Catholicism. Young Catholics today are similar but a little more conservative in religious matters. Recent polls do not all agree on this; some find young Catholics to resemble 40-50 year old Catholics, and others find the young adults to be a little more conservative. But there is agreement that the watershed of attitudes is about age 50; Catholics over 50 and under 50 are different in every survey.

We need to understand the nature of assimilation processes. When an immigrant group opens itself up to full contact with the host culture, several outcomes are predictable. First, the young people and college-educated people assimilate the fastest. Second, those living farthest from the immigrant ports of entry assimilate the fastest. Third, the immigrant community will polarize on issues arising from the immigration experience itself—such as the use of one or another language, the purity of Old World rituals, and the acceptability of becoming like everyone else in one or another respect. All immigrant groups have

been through this. Today American Catholics are in a pell-mell assimilation process which gathered speed in the 1960s and shows no signs of stopping. The Irish and German Catholics led the way, and the Midwest led the rest of the country. It is no accident that Notre Dame University is the modernist pace-setter of Catholic intellectual life—and the showpiece of Heartland Catholicism. Meanwhile many other Catholics cleave to pre-Vatican forms.

Catholic life in America is gradually losing its distinctiveness. In family income, American Catholics surpassed Protestants during the 1970s, and now they are fully middle class. Only 28% of Catholic children in grades 1 to 8 are in Catholic schools; only 16% of Catholic high school students are in Catholic schools; and only 10% of Catholic college students attend Catholic colleges. Inevitably the interfaith marriage rate is rising. Today for every 100 marriages involving Catholics, 40 to 45 are interfaith.

But this is not the whole picture, since a second immigration is in full swing. After changes in the law in 1965, a new wave of Catholic immigration appeared — this time from Latin America and Asia. Today about 25% of American Catholics are Hispanic, and the number is rising. Since the Hispanics are low in education and income, they haven't had much impact on the total Church yet.

Thinking for Themselves

Young Catholics are as religious as ever, but they think more for themselves and accord less authority to the Church. They are less motivated by feelings of guilt and obligation than their elders. For example, a 1987 Gallup poll of Catholics asked if a person can be a good Catholic without going to church every Sunday; of those 18-29, 77% said yes, compared with 62% of persons 55 or older. An important factor is that young Catholics are better educated than their elders. In recent surveys educational differences loom larger than age differences.

Young Catholics want more democratic decision-making in the Church, especially at the local level. A 1987 poll asked if the Church should have more democratic decision-making at the parish level. The young adults were the most in favor — 64% of those 18-29, 65% of those 30-54, and 46% of those 55 or over.

Has secularization set in? The research seems to say no. Yes, there is a shortage of priests and sisters, and yes, there was a downturn in church attendance between the late 1950s and the late 1970s. But many thousands of Catholics are ready to serve the church as lay leaders (not celibate priests or sisters), and vital Catholic lay organi-

zations are active on all sides. Identical polls in 1977 and 1986 found that young Catholics (18-29) during this period increased Bible reading, attendance at Catholic social functions, and attendance at prayer meetings. The rate of church attendance has been level for the past 10 years. So the future will see not so much secularization as a *transformed* church and an Americanized laity. Church leaders can expect strong pressures from the laity for reforms — especially more lay participation in decision-making (including choice of bishops), financial accountability and openness at all levels, less patriarchy and sexism, and creation of more supportive community life in parishes.

Politically, young Catholics are not very distinct from other Americans in their age and income groups. The last decade has seen a swing to the Republican Party. Young Catholics support restrictions on abortion, though less fervidly than their elders.

Young Women

A Catholic feminist movement continues to grow, and it will probably be a major player in the next decade. Its ultimate goal is ordination of women priests, but this goal is seen as too far-off and visionary by many in the movement, who stress intermediate goals of empowerment and respect for women. This movement will gain from the thousands of lay leaders (about 80% women) who will be hired by parishes in the next decade to cover for the vanishing priests. Young Catholic women are fully represented in the movement.

In spite of the feminist movement, Catholic women as a whole are not more progressive in church issues than Catholic men. For example, more Catholic men favor ordination of women priests than do women; in 1985 the figure was 51% for men, 44% for women. So the feminist movement is only a minority.

Convergence

The future will see pressure on the institutional Church from an educated laity who have come to think for themselves. They will ask for more lay participation, more open debate about moral teachings on sexual topics, and more accountability of leaders to followers. The overall result will be a gradual movement in the direction of convergence with Protestant-permeated middle class culture. Possibly the result will be a renewed and rejuvenated church.

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RELIGION AND THE U.S. PARTY SYSTEM

By Lyman A. Kellstedt

Questions about religious commitments are typically not included in election surveys. Though the Christian Right has thrust religion to the forefront of public debate, the development of survey measures to monitor linkages between religion and politics on the general public level has not kept pace with events. The only information regularly obtained marks respondents as Protestant, Catholic, or Jew. As a result, the role of religion gets poorly handled in explanations of contemporary political behavior. This situation needs to change. We need to ask about the specific denominations to which Protestants belong — permitting us to classify them into religious families that in fact behave quite differently politically, such as the establishment Congregationalists and the “new breed” Pentecostals. The many religious families can then be categorized into broader religious traditions — mainline and evangelical Protestant. More generally, we need measures of church attendance, religious salience, and doctrinal concerns, if we are to explore properly the impact of religious commitments on political behavior.

Here, I want to review briefly what we know about the relationship between religion and politics, using data from the National Election Studies (NES), University of Michigan. The NES have asked specific denominational preference since 1956. Other religion measures were added in the 1980s to permit examination of relationships between religious commitments and political behavior. Beginning with this year’s congressional election study, an even more complete set of religious measures will be available through the NES.

Religious Group Politics

Table 1 compares religious groups in terms of their party identification and presidential vote. Jews identify as Democrats and vote accordingly. Catholic identification with the Democratic party has declined, from the high level it occupied throughout most of US history, but it remains substantial. When it comes to voting, though, Catholics have gone Republican in the last three presidential contests. Mainline Protestants, the old Republican core, still show strong Republican support.¹ Evangelical Protestants maintained their historical identification with the Democratic party through 1980, even though they voted for the Republican candidate in every presidential election since 1956, except 1964. In recent years, evangelicals have changed partisan preferences as well and joined the Republican coalition. This swing of