

# ***Marriage in the Catholic Church: A Survey of U.S. Catholics***

## **Executive Summary**

In April 2007 the Committee on Marriage and Family Life 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 U.S. adult Catholics on several issues regarding the sacrament of marriage. Survey topics included: (1) awareness of and understanding of Catholic Church teaching on marriage, (2) general attitudes about marriage, and (3) personal experiences of marriage preparation, the sacrament of marriage, and daily married life. The survey was designed to assist the Committee's implementation of the National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage. The results will assist the Committee in shaping messages for the Initiative. It will identify the best ways to reach Catholics, and identify potential knowledge gaps within the Catholic population regarding understandings of marriage in the Church as well as important sub-group differences within the Catholic population regarding different aspects of marriage. In June 2007 CARA completed the survey with 1,008 self-identified adult Catholics via Knowledge Networks, a leading Internet polling firm.<sup>1</sup> A survey with this number of respondents has a margin of sampling error of  $\pm 3.1$  percentage points. As a rule of thumb, every 1 percentage point of the adult Catholic population is approximately equivalent to 500,000 persons.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Sub-Group Differences: Generation, Mass Attendance, and Gender***

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

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 more frequently attend Mass 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 theology and Church rules is usually higher among older Catholics, but knowledge of the Bible may be greatest 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-twenties and younger. Agreement with Church

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<sup>1</sup> The response rate for the survey was 74 percent. Thus, nearly three quarters of the Knowledge Networks panel members invited to take the survey completed it.

<sup>2</sup> CARA Catholic Polls (CCP) 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 adult Catholic population is approximately equivalent to 500,000 persons.

teaching is sometimes 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.

To some extent, findings from this survey echo the general tendencies described above. When respondents are asked abstractly how familiar they are with Church teaching on marriage, differences among the generations are quite small, with the Pre-Vatican Generation just slightly more likely than others to describe themselves as “very” familiar. However when presented with specific teachings and statements about marriage, the likelihood that one has heard them represented as Catholic teachings increases sharply with age. The Pre-Vatican II Generation is most likely to agree with the statement that “marriage is a vocation.” They, along with the Millennial Generation, are also most likely to agree that marriage is a calling from God and that marriage is a lifelong commitment. Among Catholics who have ever been married, members of the Vatican II Generation are most likely to have ever divorced. (Though it should be noted that this could conceivably change as members of the younger generations move further into middle age). Members of the Vatican II and Post-Vatican II generations are most likely to view divorce as acceptable “in all cases.” Members of the Pre-Vatican II Generation are more likely than younger generations of Catholics to say that their views of marriage have been “very” formed by their Catholic faith. Members of the Millennial Generation are most likely to say that their views of marriage have been “very” informed by their own family experience and background.

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, breaking down survey responses by 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.

Among respondents to the survey, those who attend Mass every week are six times as likely as those who rarely or never attend to report that their view of marriage has been “very” informed by their Catholic faith. They are also more than two and a half times as likely to describe themselves as “very” familiar with Church teaching on marriage. These two tendencies are manifest in the fact that frequent Mass attenders are considerably more likely than infrequent attenders to find their views of marriage consistent with a number of statements that align with the Catholic view of marriage: for example, that marriage is a vocation, that marriage is a lifelong commitment, that marriage contributes to the common good of society, that married love reveals God, and that the sacrament of marriage extends beyond the wedding day.

As with previous research, the survey finds a strong relationship between frequency of Mass attendance and various aspects of marital status. Among those who are currently married, the likelihood of having a spouse who is a fellow Catholic increases with frequency of Mass attendance. Among those who have ever been married, those who rarely or never attend Mass are most likely to have been divorced. Note, however, that it cannot automatically be concluded that commitment to or involvement in the Church produces stronger marriages. Because of the

Church's teachings about remarriage without an annulment, going through a divorce may cause some formerly active Catholics to become alienated from Church life.<sup>3</sup>

Compared to generation and frequency of Mass attendance, gender is less often a source of important distinctions among Catholics. Women are, on average, slightly more committed to their Catholic faith than men—a fact that reflects gender differences in religiosity among the society at large. However these and corresponding differences on knowledge of the faith and agreement with Church teaching tend to be relatively small. The same is generally true of gender differences among respondents to the present study. There are few differences between women's and men's familiarity with Church teaching on marriage, and those that exist tend to be small. However, women are slightly more likely than men to express interest in learning more about topics related to Church teaching on marriage. Women are slightly more likely than men to say their understanding of the sacrament of marriage is closely reflected in a few statements that reflect the Church's theology of marriage, including that married love reveals God, that married love brings the husband and wife closer together and therefore closer to God, that the sacrament of marriage extends beyond the wedding day, and that married love helps the couple care for others beyond their family. Women are more likely than men to say their Catholic faith has informed their view of marriage. However, they are also more likely than men to say that family experience and background, civil law, and popular culture have each informed their view of marriage.

Major findings from the study are summarized below.

### ***Marital Status and Family***

- Fifty-three percent of adult Catholics (age 18 and older) are currently married. Twenty-five percent have never been married. Thirteen percent are divorced or separated (12 percent divorced and 1 percent separated). Five percent are widowed and 4 percent are currently unmarried and living with a partner. These proportions are generally similar to those for the U.S. population as a whole.
- Two-thirds of currently married Catholics were married in the Church. One in 20 were not married in the Church but had their marriage convalidated by the Church.<sup>4</sup> The remaining three in ten married respondents indicate that they neither married in the Church nor had their marriage convalidated. Those in the Pre-Vatican II Generation are especially likely to say that they were married in the Church (84 percent, compared to 58 percent of Vatican II Generation respondents and 60 percent of Post-Vatican II and Millennial generation respondents).
- Twenty-three percent of adult Catholics have gone through a divorce. Eleven percent of adult Catholics have divorced and are currently either remarried, living with a partner, or

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<sup>3</sup> See Hout, (2000) "Angry and Alienated: Divorced and Remarried Catholics in the United States." *America*, December 16, pp. 10-12.

<sup>4</sup> Those married outside the Catholic Church (e.g., in a civil ceremony) may seek to have their marriage convalidated. Many refer to this as having their marriage "blessed." The convalidation process, which can vary by diocese and by circumstance, allows for the marriage to be recognized and validated by the Catholic Church.

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- Seventy-two percent of married Catholics have a Catholic spouse. Unmarried Catholics who are living with a partner are significantly less likely to indicate that the person they are living with is Catholic (49 percent).
- Catholics who have divorced or who are currently separated are significantly less likely than currently married Catholics to have been married in the Church (45 percent compared to 65 percent).
- Only 15 percent of divorced Catholics have sought an annulment. Of those who have, 49 percent had the request granted.
- On average, adult Catholics have had two children. Thirty-two percent have not had any children. Excluding those who have never been married, more frequent Mass attenders have more children than less frequent Mass attenders. Among Catholics who have married at some point, the average number of children for Catholics who are attending Mass weekly is about three (2.9). In comparison, the average number of children for those who attend Mass once or twice a year or rarely or never is less than two (1.6 and 1.8, respectively).

### ***Catholic Teaching about Marriage***

- Seven in ten Catholics describe themselves as at least “somewhat familiar” with Catholic teaching on marriage, with about one-third saying they are “very familiar.” The more frequently Catholics attend Mass, the more likely they are to say they are familiar with Church teaching on marriage. This is consistent with previous research showing that frequent Mass attendees (weekly or more) tend to be more aware of and knowledgeable about many aspects of Church life and Church teaching.
- Perhaps because they are already relatively familiar with Church teaching on marriage, only a minority of Catholics (30 percent or fewer) describe themselves as being even “somewhat” interested in learning more about each of several specific aspects of Church teaching on marriage. Catholics are most likely to be at least “somewhat” interested in learning more about Church teachings regarding commitment, fidelity, and faithfulness (30 percent); divorce, annulment, and remarriage (26 percent); and interfaith marriage (25 percent).
- Most Catholics say they have heard each of the following accurate statements regarding Church teachings: that marriage between two baptized people is a sacrament (71 percent), that openness to children is essential to marriage (71 percent), and that the Church does not consider a civil marriage after divorce to be sacramentally valid (71 percent). Only a minority of Catholics have heard the following inaccurate statements: that marriage between a Catholic and a non-Christian is considered a sacrament by the Church (31

percent) and that Church teaching is accepting of divorce in cases of marital infidelity (26 percent).

- However, about six in ten Catholics have heard that a non-Catholic spouse must promise to have their children raised Catholic. Of these respondents, eight in ten believe this to be an accurate statement. Thus, overall 47 percent of Catholics have heard this inaccurate statement of Church teaching—that a non-Catholic spouse must make this promise—and believe it to be true.<sup>5</sup>

### *Respondents' Views about Marriage*

- Eighty-four percent of Catholics say that the statement, “the sacrament of marriage extends beyond the wedding day” at least “somewhat closely” reflects their understanding of the sacrament.
- Two-thirds of Catholics (67 percent) report that their views on marriage have been informed at least “somewhat” by their own family background or experience. More than half (55 percent) say their views have been at least “somewhat” informed by Church teaching. The more frequently Catholics attend Mass, the more likely they are to report that their views on marriage have been “very” informed by these two sources. A third or fewer Catholics cite representations of marriage in popular culture (33 percent), civil law traditions (29 percent), or other faiths (22 percent) as being as influential.
- Three-quarters of Catholics agree that a spouse should first and foremost be a soulmate. One-third agree that it is important for spouses to share the same faith. Only about one in ten agree that marriage is an outdated institution or that personal freedom is more important than the companionship of marriage.
- Eighty-seven percent say their views are at least “somewhat” consistent with the idea that marriage is a lifelong commitment. Fewer indicate that their views are at least “somewhat” consistent with the idea that marriage is a calling from God (54 percent) or that it is a vocation (54 percent).
- Respondents were asked the open-ended question, “In your opinion, how is marriage in the Catholic Church distinctive or different from the concepts of marriage in civil law, secular society, or other faith traditions?” Three-quarters of respondents provided a response. The most common themes for these responses regarded the sacramental nature of marriage; the presence of God at the wedding and in the marriage; a stronger, long-lasting commitment; limitations on divorce and remarriage; and more rules and regulations. Some of those responding (15 percent) indicated that they could not identify any distinctive characteristics.

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<sup>5</sup> This has not been the case since the 1983 revised Code of Canon Law.

### ***Preparation for Marriage***

- Among married Catholics who were married in the Church, 90 percent say they recall that they and their spouse met with a Catholic priest before getting married. The most common forms of marriage preparation include a pre-marriage assessment inventory, such as FOCCUS or Prepare (48 percent) or reading of books or brochures provided by the Church (47 percent). Among preparation classes, the most common format used by married Catholics is a class occurring over several nights (36 percent), followed by a weekend marriage preparation program (26 percent) and a one-day program (26 percent).
- Among those currently married Catholics who participated in each of these marriage preparation programs, those most likely to say they found the program to be “very helpful” to their marriage were those in a weekend program (28 percent), those meeting with a Catholic mentor couple (26 percent), and those in classes occurring over several nights (24 percent). Fewer of those who participated in one-day marriage preparation programs (16 percent) or who completed a pre-marriage assessment inventory (18 percent) found these to be “very helpful.” At least six in ten of those who participated in any of the programs listed found their program(s) to be at least “somewhat” helpful to their marriage.
- Eighty-eight percent of divorced or separated Catholics who were married in the Church recall that they met with a priest before marriage (nearly the same percentage as currently married Catholics). The proportions of divorced or separated Catholics who went through various marriage preparation programs and activities are similar to those of married Catholics. However, in some cases, divorced or separated Catholics are *more* likely than Catholics who are currently married to say some of these preparations were “very helpful” to their marriage. For example, 40 percent of divorced or separated Catholics who met with a Catholic mentor couple say this was “very helpful” to their marriage, compared to 26 percent of married Catholics. Divorced or separated Catholics were also more likely than married Catholics to indicate a one-day marriage preparation program was “very helpful” (31 percent compared to 16 percent).
- Two-thirds or more married Catholics discussed the following issues at least “somewhat” with their spouse prior to marriage: trust and commitment, openness to having children, intimacy or sexuality, and family backgrounds or history. Slightly less than half discussed parenting approaches. Divorced and separated Catholics are less likely to have discussed *each* of these topics prior to marriage.

### ***Values That Help Sustain Marriage***

- Five-hundred married respondents (94 percent) provided an answer to the open-ended question, “What three or four values have helped most in sustaining your marriage?” By far the most commonly cited value is trust (52 percent of married respondents answering the question). The second most frequently cited set of values is related to faith, belief, or

spirituality (27 percent), followed by communication (19 percent), and family, children, or parenting (18 percent).

- Many respondents cited the following values as being among the most important to their marriage: honesty (17 percent), commitment (16 percent), respect (13 percent), and fidelity and loyalty (11 percent). Fewer respondents cited the following as core values: working through problems (7 percent), patience (6 percent), compromise, forgiveness, acceptance (6 percent), being friends (5 percent), humor (4 percent), and spending time together (4 percent).

### ***Marital Challenges and Seeking Help***

- Married Catholics tend to report that the biggest challenges they face in their relationship with their spouse are finances (40 percent citing this as having been “somewhat” or “very” challenging), finding quality time as a couple (33 percent), and communication issues (32 percent). Divorced and separated Catholics tend to cite communication issues (58 percent), trust and commitment issues (51 percent), and finances (48 percent).
- Sixty-six percent of married Catholics say they would be at least “a little likely” to ask for help if they had marital troubles (35 percent said they would be “somewhat” or “very” likely to do so). Younger married Catholics are much more likely than older married Catholics to say they would be at least “a little likely” to seek this help if needed. Only 34 percent of divorced or separated Catholics say they *did* seek help for their marital troubles.
- Married Catholics who said they would be at least “a little” likely to seek help for marital troubles say they are most likely to seek this help from family members (51 percent) followed by God or prayer life (50 percent) and friends (48 percent). Twenty-seven percent say they would turn to a marital counselor referred to them by their parish, whereas 41 percent would seek out a therapist referred to them by some other means. Thirty-three percent say they would seek help from a priest or the pastor of their parish. Few married Catholics who would seek help say they would look for this from deacons (7 percent) or lay ministers (4 percent) at their parish.
- Among divorced or separated Catholics who said they sought help for marital troubles, most sought help from a marital counselor who was not referred to them by their parish (71 percent), followed by God or prayer life (49 percent), family members (47 percent), and friends (34 percent). Twenty-five percent of divorced or separated Catholics sought help from a priest or the pastor of their parish and 15 percent went to a marital counselor that they were referred to by their parish.
- Divorced and separated Catholics were most likely to cite Church-sponsored sessions on the following issues and themes as being something that would have helped them at least “somewhat” to avoid or better deal with marital troubles: effective communication (30 percent), balancing family and career (27 percent), and spiritual life (24 percent).

Married Catholics are more likely to say they are currently “somewhat” or “very” interested in Church-sponsored sessions about spiritual life (23 percent), effective communication (20 percent), and balancing family and career (17 percent).

### *Divorce*

- Seventy-six percent of adult Catholics believe divorce to be acceptable in “some cases.” Seventeen percent say divorce is acceptable in “all cases,” and seven percent say it is “not acceptable in any case.” With regard to specific circumstances, Catholics are most likely to believe that divorce is acceptable in instances of physical abuse (96 percent), emotional abuse (92 percent), and infidelity (85 percent). They are least likely to believe it acceptable in cases of disagreement about religion (32 percent) or financial troubles (23 percent).
- Many Catholics who said divorce is “not acceptable in any case” are nonetheless accepting of divorce in particular circumstances. Nearly half or more of those Catholics who said divorce was *not* acceptable “in any case” were accepting of divorce when specifically presented with the cases of physical abuse (68 percent), emotional abuse (58 percent), and infidelity (48 percent).
- Fewer than three in ten Catholics agree “somewhat” or “strongly” that divorce is usually the best solution when a couple can’t seem to work out their marriage problems (29 percent) or that living with a partner before marriage decreases the risk of divorce (27 percent). Seventy-one percent of Catholics agree at least “somewhat” that couples do not take marriage seriously enough when divorce is easily available.

### *Single Catholics*

- Among Catholics who have never married, three-quarters say it is at least “a little likely” that they will marry in the future (25 percent “somewhat likely” and 29 percent “very likely”). Never-married Catholics attending Mass weekly or more often are more likely than those attending a few times a year or less often to say they are “very likely” to be married at some point in their life (41 percent compared to 25 percent).
- The most common reason cited for not having married, among those at least “a little likely” to be married in the future, is “I haven’t met the right person” (62 percent) followed by “I am focused on other aspects of my life” (47 percent), and “I am personally not ready to marry” (37 percent).
- Only 31 percent of never-married Catholics who say they are at least “a little likely” to be married in the future say it is either “somewhat” or “very” important that their spouse be Catholic. Only 46 percent say it is either “somewhat” or “very” important that they be married in the Catholic Church.

- Fifty-four percent say it is “very important” to them that they and a future spouse agree on the number of children they will have. Twenty-one percent indicate this is “somewhat important.” About two thirds of single Catholics are aware if the Church’s teachings regarding openness to children as being essential to marriage (68 percent) and a similar percentage agrees “somewhat” or “strongly” that watching children grow up is life’s greatest joy (66 percent).