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U.S. Catholics in Poll See a Church Out of Touch

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Roman Catholics in the United States say that their church and bishops are out of touch, and that the next pope should lead the church in a more modern direction on issues like birth control and ordaining women and married men as priests, according to the latest New York Times/CBS News poll.

Seven out of 10 say Pope Benedict XVI and the Vatican have done a poor job of handling sexual abuse, a significant rise from three years ago. A majority said that the issue had led them to question the Vatican's authority. The sexual abuse of children by priests is the largest problem facing the church, Catholics in the poll said.

Three-fourths of those polled said they thought it was a good idea for Benedict to resign. Most wanted the next pope to be "someone younger, with new ideas." A majority said they wanted the next pope to make the church's teachings more liberal.

With cardinals now in Rome preparing to elect Benedict's successor, the poll indicated that the church's hierarchy had lost the confidence and allegiance of many American Catholics, an intensification of a long-term trend. They like their priests and nuns, but many feel that the bishops and cardinals do not understand their lives.

"I don't think they are in the trenches with people," said Therese Spender, 51, a homemaker in Fort Wayne, Ind., who said she attended Mass once a week and agreed to answer further questions after the poll. "They go to a lot of meetings, but they are not out in the street."

Even Catholics who frequently attend Mass said they were not following the bishops' lead on issues that the church had recently invested much energy, money and credibility in fighting — artificial birth control and same-sex marriage.

Eric O'Leary, 38, a funeral director in Des Moines who attends Mass weekly, said: "I would like them not to be so quick to condemn people because of their sexual preference or because of abortion, or to refuse priests the right to get married or women to be priests. I don't think the church should get involved in whether or not people use birth control."

The nationwide telephone poll was conducted on landlines and cellphones from Feb. 23 to 27, when

many Catholics were still absorbing news of the first resignation of a pope in 600 years. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus four percentage points for the 580 Catholics, who were oversampled for purposes of analysis in the survey of 1,585 adults.

Benedict, a soft-spoken scholar and a church traditionalist, had apparently made little impression on American Catholics in his eight years as pope. Half of those in the poll said they either had no opinion of him or had not heard enough about him. Nevertheless, 4 in 10 had a favorable opinion, and only one in 10 unfavorable.

“He’s written three or four books, and his writings are incredible,” said Leonard Lefebvre, 70, a retired economist in Tequesta, Fla. “He’s continued on course, and he’s held the religion to where it’s supposed to be at.”

The poll suggested that the papacy no longer occupies the exalted position it once did. Asked whether the pope is infallible when he teaches on matters of morality and faith, 40 percent said yes, 46 percent said no, and 14 percent said they did not know. Nearly 8 in 10 Catholics polled said they would be more likely to follow their conscience on “difficult moral questions” than to follow the pope’s teachings.

When asked which “one thing” they would “most like to see the next pope accomplish,” the most common responses that respondents volunteered were, in order: bring people back to church, modernize the church, unify the church, and do something about sexual abuse.

A spate of new information about prelates hiding the misdeeds of pedophile priests appeared to have taken a toll. A higher percentage of Catholics said the pope and the Vatican had done a poor job of handling reports of past sexual abuse recently (69 percent) compared with 2010 (55 percent), when the abuse scandal flared in many European countries. This is despite the church’s many reforms in the last 10 years and reports of abuse by priests in the United States declining drastically.

Majorities said they wanted to see the next pope maintain the church’s opposition to abortion and the death penalty, even though they themselves were not opposed to them. Three-quarters of Catholics supported abortion under at least some circumstances, and three-fifths favored the death penalty.

“I can understand how the Catholic Church stands against it,” said Geri Toni, 57, of abortion. “We are not supposed to kill. That is one of our Ten Commandments.”

“But as a woman,” said Ms. Toni, who lives in Fort Myers, Fla., and attends Mass weekly, “I have to make sense of it, and I believe choice comes down to the individual.”

On every other hotly debated issue, Catholics wanted the next pope to lead the church in an about-face. Seven of 10 Catholics polled said the next pope should let priests marry, let women become priests and allow the use of artificial methods of birth control. Nine of 10 said they wanted the next pope to allow the use of condoms to prevent the spread of H.I.V. and other diseases.

Sixty-two percent of Catholics said they were in favor of legalizing marriage for same-sex couples. Catholics approved of same-sex marriage at a higher rate than Americans as a whole, among whom 53 percent approved.

John Sadel, 28, a supervisor in a plastics production facility in Bethlehem, Pa., said, "I'm not saying change everything the church stands for, but you need to evolve with the times if you want to remain a viable religion."

The American bishops also appear to have lost ground among their own flock in their campaign to fight the White House rule that requires employers to provide insurance coverage for contraceptives — a campaign the bishops say is about religious freedom.

One year ago, two-thirds of Catholics polled said that religiously affiliated employers, like hospitals or universities, should be allowed to opt out of covering birth control for their female employees because of religious or moral objections. In the most recent poll, only about half of Catholics said they agreed.

The issue has become a political litmus test, with Catholic bishops and religious conservatives saying that their religious freedom is being threatened by President Obama's policies. But when asked what the debate is about, only 40 percent of Catholics polled said "religious freedom," while 50 percent said "women's health and their rights" — an indication that Mr. Obama's framing of the issue is holding sway even among many Catholics.

Catholics seemed to feel far more warmly toward their local priests than those in the hierarchy. Seven in 10 Catholics in the poll said they felt that their parish priests were "in touch with the needs of Catholics today." Eighty-five percent of those who attend Mass said the sermons were excellent or good.

Nearly two-thirds of Catholics polled said they had not changed the amount of money they contributed to the church in the last few years; 16 percent said they gave more; 17 percent said less. Of those giving less, half said it was because of financial circumstances, and one-quarter cited unhappiness with the church.

Nationwide, bishops are closing parish churches and schools to save money and to respond to changing demographics. The reorganization is so sweeping that the poll found that 11 percent of

Catholics who attend Mass said their parish church had closed or merged in the last few years.

Allison Kopicki, Dalia Sussman and Marina Stefan contributed reporting.

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