

Laity wonder where the money goes

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The church's most reliable donors -- parishioners in the pews weekly -- continue to call for greater financial accountability and transparency from their parishes and dioceses, and they want more lay input into church financial matters, according to an annual survey of Catholic donor attitudes.

Yet fewer than half say they know what happens to their contributions, the report found.

Furthermore, for the third year the vast majority of survey respondents say the clergy sexual abuse scandal affects them when deciding whether and how much they should give to the church.

Sixty percent of respondents worry that the cost of clergy sexual abuse impedes the church's ability to fulfill its mission.

"We've done this for three years now. We've seen that the call of accountability is growing among Catholic parishioners," Francis Butler, president of the association that commissioned the study, told NCR.

Butler said that on the whole, total donations nationally have not declined because some donors (8 percent locally and 5 percent nationally) have increased their giving, but more are giving less (14 percent locally and 19 percent nationally), and overall fewer people are giving. This is why he finds the trend in donor attitudes "worrisome."

"If I were a bishop or a pastor, I would be very concerned," he said. "I would do everything in my power to make sure people understand what is happening with their donations."

The study was sponsored by Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities, FADICA, and conducted by Zogby International and the Center of the Study of Church Management at Villanova University. It is based on telephone interviews conducted during the first week of December, sampling 803 respondents who reported they attend Mass regularly. The survey's margin of error is plus or minus 3.8 percent.

Charles Zech, a professor of economics at Villanova University in Pennsylvania and author of the report, said, "It is important to remember that the analysis in this report is based on the opinions of regular Mass-attending Catholics, those who attend Mass daily, weekly or almost every week."

"This population can be considered the major source of donor support for the church," Zech said.

Zech's report lists three areas of accountability and transparency the laity say they expect:

"They want each bishop to give a full accounting of the financial costs arising from the [clergy sexual abuse] scandal."

In 2002, Zech said, 78 percent of the survey sample asked for this; in 2004, 76 percent did. Researchers at John Jay College tried to provide this information in their report on sexual abuse by clergy, which was released in February last year.

"Unfortunately, fully 14 percent of the dioceses and religious orders failed to report any financial figures at all in the John Jay report," Zech said. "Other dioceses only reported partial figures."

"The laity want publicly released annual audits at all levels."

More than 60 percent of respondents want parishes and dioceses to release annual independent audits and 77 percent said they want dioceses to comply with reporting standards approved by the U.S. bishops' conference, but only 38 percent know whether their dioceses provide this or not.

"This is not saying that [dioceses] didn't do the audits," Butler said, "but it does say they are not doing what they pledged to do and that is to run a church that is fully open and where the parishioners are informed."

But he added, "My guess is that if you look at the dioceses as a whole you would probably find maybe a third to a half are compliant with the national norms. A goodly segment just are not."

"Finally, Catholics want to be consulted on church finances."

Eighty percent of respondents asked for open forums to discuss parish financial planning and fundraising.

"Today most donors are rather proactive," Butler said. "They want to understand the charities they are active in. So if the church is going to be an effective steward, it is going to have to invite people in, making sure they are speaking up and that they are a part of the activities of the church. That includes setting budgets and accounting for how money is used."

The survey report lists a number of recommendations, including:

The publication of diocesan and parish audits in their entirety.

Parish and diocesan forums with finance council members present who can explain and respond to parishioner questions.

Continuing professional training for parish and diocesan financial officers.

Every parishioner should have access to written reports on all national and diocesan appeals that contain financial information and progress reports.

Survey: Sex abuse crisis has not affected Mass attendance

Weekly Mass attendance among self-identifying Catholics in the United States has not changed since September 2000, according to the last survey results of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate of Georgetown University. This is evidence, researchers say, that the clergy sexual abuse crisis that erupted three years ago has had little effect on driving Catholics from the pews.

The center, known as CARA, reported Jan. 10 that from September 2000 through September 2004, on average 33 percent of Catholics said they attend Mass every week. Another 12 percent said they attend Mass almost every week. There are about 64.3 million Catholics in the United States.

"Contrary to the notions that allegations of and cases of sex abuse may have led to a noticeable decrease in Mass attendance ... these surveys indicate little if any change in the percentage of adult Catholics who say they attend Mass every week in the last four years," said CARA research associate Mark M. Gray in the report of the latest survey.

The data closely matches data on Mass attendance collected by the Gallup Organization since the 1930s. The Gallup data shows Catholic Mass attendance has been in decline since a peak of 74 percent in 1957 and 1958.

Gray said the long-term decline is best explained by "stark generational differences" rather than large segments of the Catholic population changing their patterns of Mass attendance.

In 2004, about 52 percent of what CARA calls the "Pre-Vatican II Generation" (those born before 1943) reported attending Mass weekly or more. Meanwhile, 38 percent of the "Vatican II Generation" (born between 1943 and 1960) and slightly more than 21 percent of the "Post-Vatican II Generations" (born after 1960) report this level of attendance.