

By Peter McDonough and Susan Pinkus

Clerical Generations

Reform, reaction, and the priesthood

Second of two parts.

In 1961, Pope John XXIII summoned the first great council of the Roman Catholic Church since the 1800s. One of the purposes of the Second Vatican Council, which convened each fall for the next four years, was to increase the relevance of Catholicism to modern life. The result is generally regarded as a major transformation of the church's traditional past.

Since Vatican II, Catholics in the United States and all other industrialized societies have become more liberal in what the church calls "matters of faith and morals"—contraception, divorce, premarital sex, the ordination of women, and so forth. Except for abortion, it has become hard to distinguish the positions of Catholics

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and Protestants, taken as a whole, on these issues. This trend has been accompanied by a fall-off in attendance at Sunday mass.

Many observers, distinguishing between adherence to organized religion and the pursuit of personal spirituality, question whether these shifts add up to advancing secularization. But most agree that loyalty to "the institutional church" and its hierarchical accoutrements has waned [see *Public Perspective*, March/April 2003].

Both trends are linear. Older Catholics are generally more conservative and deferential to the institutional church; younger Catholics are more liberal and progressively indifferent to the hierarchy. The sharpest break occurs between pre-Vatican II Catholics (those now in their sixties or older) and all the rest.

In a national study of Catholic priests conducted by the *Los Angeles Times* in the late summer and fall of 2002, pre-Vatican II priests, like older parishioners, were, for the most part, also



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conservative when asked their views on most matters having to do with religious beliefs and moral doctrines. Not unexpectedly, the Vatican II cohort—those now in their fifties and sixties, who came of age around the time of the Council—tended to be more liberal.

But a striking reversal showed up in the survey among the youngest, post-Vatican II generation of clerics. These newer recruits were *less* liberal than the older priests and markedly more conservative than lay people their own age.

This U-shaped profile of the clergy, which isolates the Vatican II cohort as the most progressive between the conservative oldest and youngest of their peers, matches the results of studies carried out by Catholic agencies themselves. Age, or the sharply varied historical experience that age represents, is the major clue to ideological divisions within the clergy.

What are the implications of this generational split for clerical-lay relations? The neo-conservatism of younger priests falls short of a full-scale restoration of old-time religion. Whatever their zeal, their numbers are small. They constitute a passionate minority within a predominantly progressive and centrist priesthood, and they are definitely out of step with the majority of Catholics.

Questions arise, too, about the implications for the priesthood itself of these divisions among its members. They begin with important patterns found in the realm of “pelvic theology,” as one Jesuit priest referred to issues relating to sexuality, that extend to attitudes of priests toward the church hierarchy, and that color their perceptions of their environment and the doctrinal requirements to which they are subject.

According to the *magisterium* (official teaching) of the church, all sexual questions are “equally grave.” In practice, however, priests envision a gradient that resembles the old distinction between venial and mortal sin. Among the priests in the *LA Times* survey, abortion was viewed as the most serious of eight issues they were asked to consider. Nearly three-quarters (71%) of those who an-

swered the question claimed it was always a sin for a woman to get an abortion. Right behind came the related issue of using stem cells of fetuses for medical research, which 57% considered serious.

On the other hand, masturbation stood toward the bottom of the sexual-moral ranking—fewer than one-third of the priests (30%) said it was a serious sin—and only 28% thought so of the use of artificial methods of birth control by married couples.

[There is an historical irony at work here. *Humane Vitae*, the “birth control encyclical” issued in 1968, ignited dissent in Catholicism. Nowadays, most American Catholics simply ignore the papal injunction against the pill and condoms, and most clergy prefer to remain silent on the issue. “The pope leaves us alone,” comedian Bob Newhart cracked, “we leave him alone.”]

In addition to this issue-by-issue diversity, the familiar variation across age groups was also evident. Once again, the Vatican II cohort—roughly, those between 51 and 70 years of age—was consistently the most liberal. Priests over 70 were the most conservative, and those aged 50 or less were as conservative as the oldest men.

The U-curve grouping the oldest and youngest respondents together appeared once again in response to the question, “Do you think it is always, often, seldom or never a sin to engage in homosexual behavior?” (see Figure 1). It disappeared, however, when the priests were asked whether there was a “homosexual subculture” at the seminaries they attended. Over half (52%) of the youngest priests (between ages 21 and 40) responded “Yes, definitely,” or “I think so but I’m not positive,” while one in ten priests over age 80 agreed. The proportion who saw the seminaries as harboring a gay subculture rose steadily as the analysis shifted from the older to the younger men.

A different but equally complex pattern emerged when priests were asked their views about their superiors in the hierarchy.

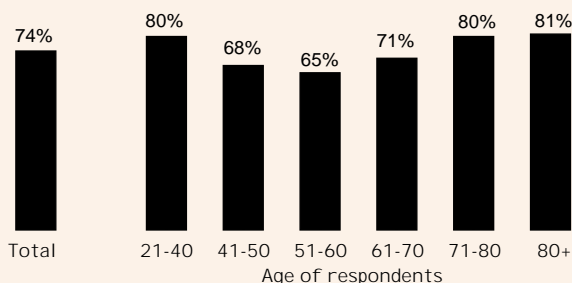
At first glance, most did not seem terribly distressed by the performance of their bishops in light of recent sexual abuse scandals. For example, regardless of age, sizable majorities expressed satisfaction with the original zero-tolerance policy for clerics found to have committed sexual abuse, as adopted at the June meeting of bishops in Dallas; the same went for

Figure 1
Matters of Morality

Question:

Do you think it is always, often, seldom or never a sin to engage in homosexual behavior?

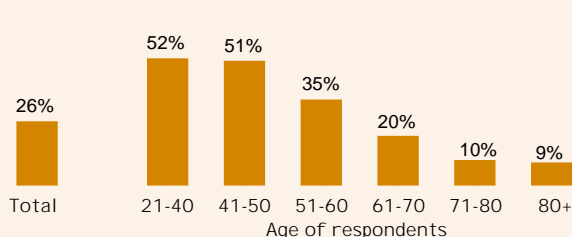
PERCENT RESPONDING ALWAYS/OFTEN



Question:

Thinking now about the seminary or seminaries you attended, was there a homosexual subculture there at the time, or not? How certain are you?

PERCENT RESPONDING DEFINITELY/PROBABLY



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

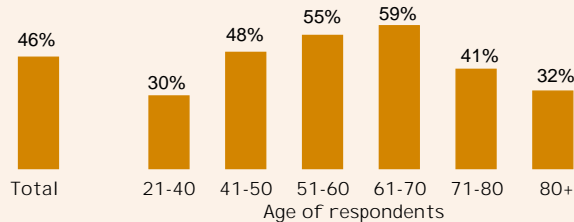
Figure 2

Open to Change

Question:

Would you favor or oppose the ordination of women as priests?

PERCENT RESPONDING STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT FAVOR



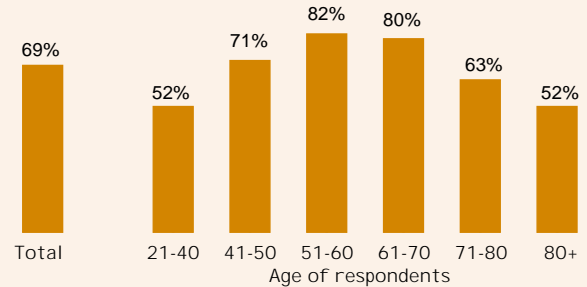
Note: Asked of priests.

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

Question:

Would you favor or oppose the ordination of married priests in the Latin rite?

PERCENT RESPONDING STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT FAVOR



overall approval rates regarding the bishops' job performance.

But priests felt let down by the bishops in two crucial ways. Only about one-third rated the zero-tolerance policy as fair to those priests who were accused of abuse. (The Vatican eventually softened the policy in this area, ostensibly to protect due process.) And 65% thought that the measures adopted in Dallas failed to provide for the discipline of bishops who covered up for abusive priests.

The aftermath of the June meeting was not outright mutiny. Still, nearly half of the priests (46%) favored direct democratic elections of diocesan bishops by the diocesan clergy and laity in the US—a position that flew in the face of the current process of ecclesiastical appointment by Rome.

Rules-of-the-game questions like these matter because they directly affect institutional privilege, and they are all the more touchy when they become bound up with the conventions surrounding pelvic theology, especially the Catholic church's ban on women entering the priesthood and the requirement for priests to be celibate. If women could be ordained, the argument goes, then the male hierarchy of Catholicism

would be in jeopardy; if married people could become priests, then celibacy would vanish as a necessary condition for authority.

In this light, it is intriguing to find that nearly half (46%) of the priests favored the ordination of women (see Figure 2). To be sure, the number increased to nearly three in five among the usual suspects—the 61- to 70-year-olds at the heart of the Vatican II generation. But even among the most junior, neo-conservative priests, support reached 30%.

Still more striking was the backing for the ordination of married priests in the Latin Rite. Overall, the figure was a hefty 69% in favor. Support peaked among the 51 to 60-year-olds (82%) and 61 to 70-year-olds (80%), yet it retained a majority (52%) even among the youngest, generally conservative priests, and the oldest priests, who were also conservative.

What should we make of the results of the *LA Times* survey? On the one hand, they confirm much of what has been reported anecdotally about, for example, the conservatism of younger priests. And, although we have only hinted at the link here, the data also throw light on the connection between

opinions about sexual-moral issues and attitudes toward church authority. The correlations between conservative-liberal preferences in these normative and bureaucratic domains are very strong. This makes incremental change and the compartmentalization of reform difficult in Catholicism.

On the other hand, the absolute level of support for change in the traditional priesthood is impressive. Even among self-proclaimed conservatives, sympathy for the idea of a married clergy enjoys majority support.

The reality is that the Catholic priesthood is in crisis not just because many lay people disagree with the conservative drift among younger priests, or because younger priests are at odds with an aging generation that is in turn frustrated by still-older reactionaries, or because many priests feel let down by their bishops. All these things matter, of course.

But what is perhaps most alarming for the future of the traditional priesthood in the US is the combination of harsh demography—the number of recruits is down and shows no signs of an upsurge—and the widespread uncertainty within the sacerdotal establishment itself about the justice of an exclusively male, celibate clergy. ●