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Poll: Catholics Embrace Faith, Not Mass

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NEW YORK -- American Catholics said in a new survey they were pleased with the leadership of Pope Benedict XVI, ahead of his first visit to the U.S. since he was elected. The study also found intense interest in faith among some young people.

Yet, few parishioners overall said they go to confession, and most believed they could be good Roman Catholics without going to Mass.

The poll, released Sunday, was commissioned by the nation's bishops and conducted in February by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University.

San Francisco Archbishop George Niederauer, head of the bishops' communications committee, was encouraged by the openness to faith in the survey but said it highlighted the need for better religious instruction.

"The challenge for church leaders," he said, "is to help them see what Catholicism really means."

Strengthening Catholic identity and observance are central themes of Benedict's papacy, and topics he is expected to address when he travels to Washington and New York starting Tuesday.

In the survey, eight of 10 Catholics said they were somewhat or very satisfied with his leadership. Nearly half a million people sought tickets to his public events in both cities.

The poll found that Catholics born before 1960 _ among the most faithful parishioners _ and those born since the 1980s have similar outlooks.

For Catholics who attend Mass at least once a month, an overwhelming majority of the young and older generation believe Christ is present in the Eucharist.

Even more, the younger, regular Mass-goers surpass their elders in observing Lent, with nearly all saying they abstain from meat on Fridays and receive ashes on Ash Wednesday. The young people are also more likely to consider devotion to saints very important to their faith.

However, the study found that only 36 percent of the younger Catholics attend Mass at least once a month, compared with 64 percent of the older generation.

Sixty-eight percent of all Catholics surveyed said they agreed that they believed they could be in good standing with the church without going to weekly Mass.

The poll, "Sacraments Today: Belief and Practice Among U.S. Catholics," found that nearly one-third of the nation's 64 million Catholics attend Mass in any given week. That figure has remained the same in the last five years, according to the report.

Thirty percent of the respondents said they go to confession less than once a year and 45 percent said they never go.

Regarding the church's social justice teaching, two-thirds of Catholics said helping those in need is a moral duty for Catholics.

The survey also measured satisfaction with the American church hierarchy. Seventy-two percent of Catholics said they were somewhat or very satisfied with the bishops' leadership, a 14-point jump since 2004, when the clergy sex abuse crisis was still roiling the church.

On the Net:

Official papal visit site: <http://www.uspapalvisit.org/>

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