

A RESPONSE TO THE RESEARCH

Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz
Chairman
Subcommittee on Marriage and Family Life
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) has rendered a valuable service in conducting this landmark national research project on U.S. Catholics and marriage (October 2007) for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in connection with our National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage. I am very grateful to Dr. Mark M. Gray, Ph.D. and his colleagues at CARA for their work and to Dr. Carl A. Anderson and the Knights of Columbus for funding the project. These research findings and the initial analysis contained in the report provide a valuable resource for pastoral reflection, decision-making, and practice.

This is the first time that such a varied and comprehensive body of data about Catholic patterns in marriage has been collected and analyzed. The study establishes a needed baseline of demographic information about the marital status and related characteristics of adult Catholics across a generational timeline. We now have important, accurate information on such things as: the percentages of Catholics who are unmarried, married, or divorced; family and educational background; religious affiliation of the spouses; number of children; and the extent of participation in religious activities including Mass attendance.

The study also provides much information and insight about Catholics' familiarity with Church teaching on marriage, their views on a variety of issues, their attitudes, values and behaviors regarding certain aspects of marriage and family life.

Not surprisingly, the study paints a mixed picture. It gives us reasons to be grateful and hopeful. It also raises concerns and presents us with challenges.

Marriage and divorce

In terms of marital status and certain attitudes about marriage, we see that Catholics are very similar to the general population. Sadly, this trend also holds true for divorce. Here both the good news and the bad news are the same: in general, Catholics are neither more nor less likely to get divorced than anyone else.

It is necessary, however, to make distinctions about sub-groups within the general Catholic population. Those who attend Mass weekly are more likely than those who attend less frequently to be currently married, to have a Catholic spouse, to say they are very familiar with Catholic teaching on marriage, and to have views about marriage that are informed by their faith and consistent with Church teaching. These findings seem to be consistent with a general conclusion of social research, namely, that religious affiliation and practice are related positively to marital stability and vice versa.

When we look at the specific patterns of divorce we see that Catholics of the generation born between 1943 and 1960 are more likely to have been divorced. Thirty-eight percent of this generation has experienced a divorce at some point in their life compared to sixteen percent of all other adult Catholics. We are very concerned about this fact inasmuch as divorce in the parents' generation can reverberate in negative ways into succeeding generations. In this way, a "culture of divorce" gains a foothold and competes against a "culture of marriage."

However, the research also shows that married Catholics are more likely to have parents who are (or who were before their death) married to each other. This shows the power communicated by a positive example of fidelity. Another finding, on which we can build, is that two-thirds of Catholics say their view of marriage is informed by their family background and experience.

The next generation of young Catholics is being influenced strongly by the marriages of their parents today. Will the influence be positive or negative? This is a key question. We realize the

necessity of ministry not only to those preparing for marriage but also to those who are now married. It must be offered not only for the sake of today's couples but also for the wellbeing of marriage and family life in future generations.

Church teachings

We are encouraged to learn that the majority of Catholic adults say they are either somewhat or very familiar with Church teachings on marriage. They express a wide-ranging understanding of the nature and purposes of marriage that includes beliefs about permanence, commitment, openness to children, the value of spousal love, and the centrality of God in a marriage. Moreover, more than half the respondents said their Catholic faith has informed their view of marriage. All of this provides a good foundation here on which we can build further education and deeper spiritual development.

A good example of both the need and the opportunity for education is in the area of divorce. Some aspects of Church teaching about divorce are not well understood by Catholics or are very challenging to them. On the one hand, Catholics are significantly *less likely* than the U.S. population to agree that divorce is usually the best solution when a couple can't seem to resolve their marriage problems. Eighty-seven percent of Catholics say they consider marriage to be a lifetime commitment. Yet, twenty-three percent of adult Catholics have gone through a divorce – a figure similar to the U.S. population as a whole. Also, seventy-six percent believe divorce to be acceptable in some cases and seventeen percent think it is acceptable in *all* cases. Findings like these reveal how conflicted people can be about divorce as well as how important it is to give more support to couples to help them sustain and, if necessary, reconcile and restore their marriages.

Marriage preparation

The Catholic Church in the United States devotes much time and effort to marriage preparation. The CARA research indicates that our resources are well placed. Ninety percent of engaged couples meet with a priest to discuss the sacrament of marriage prior to getting married. Most types of marriage preparation currently being offered are rated at least somewhat helpful by about sixty percent of the respondents. It is interesting to note that the issues (trust and commitment, openness to having children) most dealt with by couples in their preparation period are the very issues that married couples subsequently found to be among the least challenging in their relationship. It seems that the right topics are being addressed in a timely manner.

Living the sacrament of marriage

Although marriage preparation receives high marks for its helpfulness, it is sobering to note that relatively few Catholics seem willing to seek church-sponsored help for difficulties once they are married. A similarly small percentage of people say they are interested in participating in church-sponsored educational sessions for married couples. We must find ways to offer couples a more integrated, continuous and varied ministry that will help them to grow in happiness and holiness through the entire lifecycle of a marriage.

We are concerned that thirty percent of Catholics have neither married in the Church nor have had their marriage subsequently sanctified by the Church. This reveals a lack of understanding and appreciation of the *sacrament* of marriage by Catholics and points to the need for more extensive and creative attempts to convey the rich meaning of this sacrament.

An even greater concern is the growing rate (41%) of marriage outside the Church among younger Catholics as well as the fact that more than half of unmarried young Catholic adults do not

consider it important to be married in the Church. These data may indicate an increasing number of Catholics who are unlikely to experience the full value and graces of the sacrament in the future.

The importance of children

There is encouraging evidence about the importance of children. Most Catholics see children as an essential purpose of marriage and understand that openness to children is a fundamental teaching of the Church regarding marriage. For example, sixty-seven percent understand that part of the sacrament of marriage is lived through the experience of having children – an experience that is meant to bring the couple closer together and therefore closer to God. Seventy-eight percent agree that watching children grow is life’s greatest joy. Seventy-five percent of never married Catholics consider it somewhat or very important that they and their future spouse agree on the number of children they will have.

Conclusion: urgency and opportunity

This new research on Catholics and marriage confronts us with a sense both of urgency and opportunity. It identifies strengths and accomplishments on which we are eager to build. It shines a light on challenges and difficulties which we must address. Our National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage includes both efforts. The Initiative draws its life and direction from the Catholic Church’s teaching on marriage. The Initiative also places great value on the experience of married couples and on the expertise available from many sources, including the social sciences. This CARA research report brings the work of our Pastoral Initiative to a new level of understanding. It enhances our commitment to teaching about the gift of marriage, to offering pastoral care for couples and families, and ultimately to the renewal of marriage and family life in our Church and society.