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What American Catholics Think About the Scandal

By William R. Barnett
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Although American Catholics remain generally loyal in their commitment to and participation in the church, they are profoundly unhappy at the way bishops have handled the clerical sex abuse scandal. Feeling saddened and betrayed as case after case of sexual abuse of minors by priests and even bishops has been reported in the media, ordinary Catholics across the board—young and old, men and women, religiously progressive and traditionalist—desire greater accountability by the church's hierarchy and greater participation by laity in the governance of the church. Such general conclusions emerge from surveys conducted by *Contemporary Catholic Trends* (CCT), a national telephone survey of adult (18 and over) U.S. Catholics conducted twice annually by Le Moyne College and Zogby International. The target sample of 1500 interviews is randomly drawn from a Zogby database of residential phone numbers of American Catholics. CCT employs a trend design, meaning that we survey American Catholics periodically and repeat certain questions over time to detect important trends.

Our data showed that overwhelming disapproval of American Catholics with Church leaders' handling of clerical sex abuse cases emerged immediately following revelations about the scandal in the public media. By March 2002, virtually all Catholics were aware of media reports of the scandal, and most Catholics believed the reports (see Table 1). Although few reported having "personal knowledge" of child sexual abuse by a priest, a larger proportion of those who attended Catholic schools had personal knowledge, compared to those who attended public schools.

Most Catholics gave the American bishops a "fair" or "poor" rating on their handling of the crisis, and, except for the oldest cohort of 65+ years of age, criticism of the bishops increased with age, level of education, and income. Perhaps most important, we noticed a sharp drop in the job approval of the American bishops' leadership of the American Church (see Chart 1).

American Catholics aware of reports of clerical sexual abuse	93%
American Catholics believing reports of clerical sexual abuse	83%
Those reporting "personal knowledge" of sexual abuse by a priest	9%
Attendees of Catholic schools with "personal knowledge" of abuse	12%
Attendees of public schools with "personal knowledge" of abuse	<6%

Table 1: Awareness of clerical sexual abuse cases (March 2002).

Clearly, while the bishops still enjoy majority support, they have lost considerable trust and support among American laity since 2001 prior to the scandal's becoming widely reported and known. Whether that decline has bottomed out remains to be seen.

The preliminary Charter adopted in Dallas by the American bishops in June 2002 which included a "zero tolerance" policy (meaning

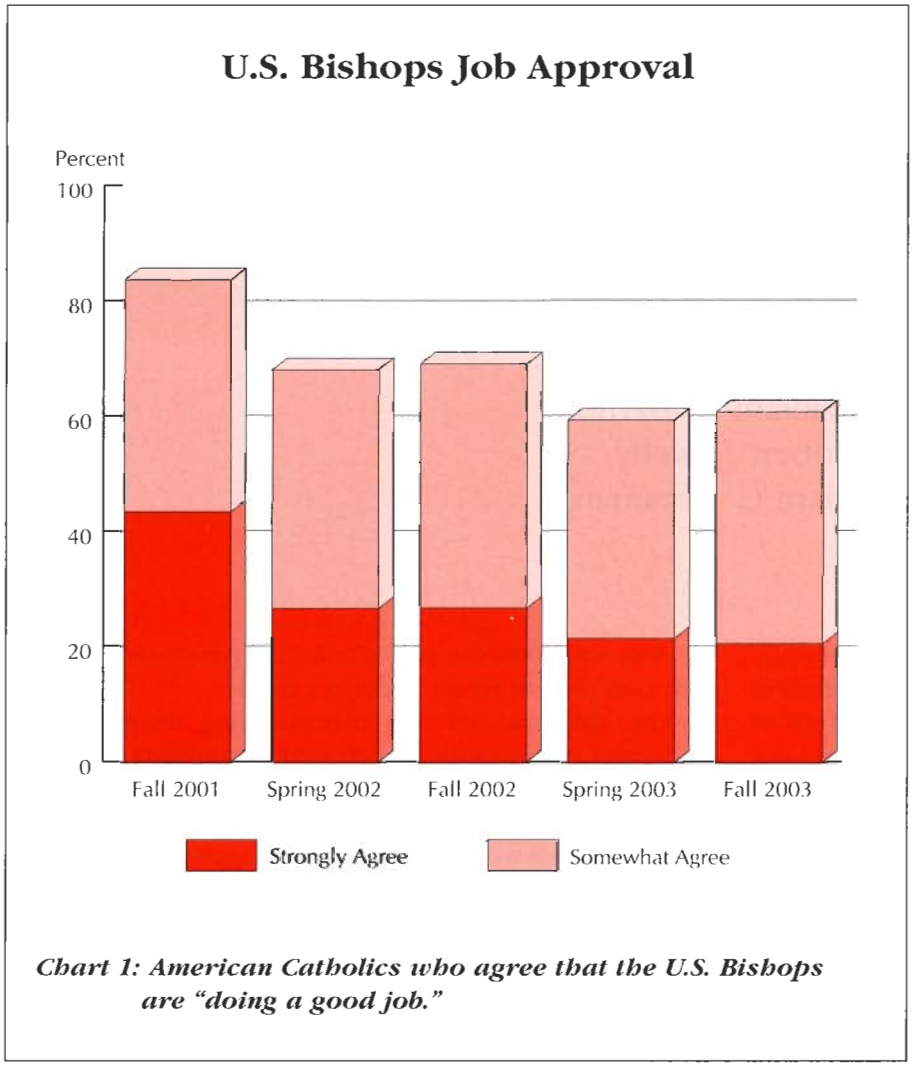

Chart 1: American Catholics who agree that the U.S. Bishops are "doing a good job."

removal from ministry of any priest found guilty of even one offense of child sexual abuse) received broad support from American Catholics. Virtually all Catholics agreed that any priest found to have committed sexual abuse of a minor should be permanently removed from ministry and that the Pope should take action against bishops who failed to do so. Two-thirds felt that every diocese should establish a board controlled by laity to oversee diocesan finances with regard to possible use of church funds to pay out-of-court settlements in cases of sex abuse. Compared to the earlier March 2002 survey, the proportion of Catholics who favored reporting all allegations of child sex abuse to civil authorities rose to from 85 percent to 96 percent. Many Catholics (17 percent, but greater among the older and more affluent) reported giving less money to the Church. Nevertheless, the proportion of Catholics who say they are considering leaving the Church has remained constant (at about 5 percent) in all of our surveys. Catholics are not leaving the Church because of the scandal!

Following the November 2002 meeting of the American bishops, we asked American

Positions/Issues	March 2002	June 2002	November 2002
Support for overall policy	NA	79%	80%
Awareness of revised policy	NA	NA	65%
Support for increased confidentiality of diocesan investigations	NA	NA	23%
Support for role of laity in diocesan tribunals		Strong role 89%	Weaker role 64%
Support for reporting all allegations to civil authorities	85%	95%	96%
Support for *complying with local law* in reporting allegations to civil authorities	NA	NA	58%

Table 2: Responses to revisions in U.S. Bishops' policy on handling sexual abuse cases.

Catholics what they thought about the revisions of the Dallas policies mandated by the Vatican. Only 65 percent were aware that the Vatican had delayed formal approval of the policies adopted in June and had requested certain changes. Overall support for the revised policies, including changes such as reaffirmation of the central authority of bishops, ensuring due process for accused priests under canon law, immediately informing the Vatican of all allegations, and not transferring known offenders to another diocese was high (80 percent). Nevertheless, support for some of the specific changes adopted in November weakened (see Table 2).

For example, most Catholics opposed a policy of heightened confidentiality whereby the findings of diocesan tribunals would not be reported to victims or the accused. Moreover, compared to June 2002, support for the revised policy that decreased the role for laity dropped considerably. Most telling, however, was the response to the change in policy whereby bishops would be expected to report allegations to civil authorities *only if required by local law* (several states do not require such reporting by church authorities). Support for *mandatory* reporting of all allegations to civil authorities was 96 percent in June 2002, but fell for the revised policy in November 2002.

Despite having adopted Vatican-approved policies for handling allegations of clerical sexual abuse and for preventing further instances of child sexual abuse, the American bishops have a long way to go to recover the level of trust and approval that they enjoyed before the scandal broke. Our data show that the bishops now face a communications challenge. In December 2003, only 40 percent of American Catholics were aware of their dioceses' initiating programs in response to the clerical sexual scandal as mandated by "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People." Older respondents and those who attended Mass weekly were more likely to be aware of the programs, while respondents who identified themselves as liberal Catholics were less likely to be aware of the programs. Importantly, *76 percent of Catholics 18-to-29 years of age were unaware of the programs.*

Apart from direct reactions to the scandal itself, American Catholics' responses to the broader context of the challenges facing the American Church are more difficult to describe.

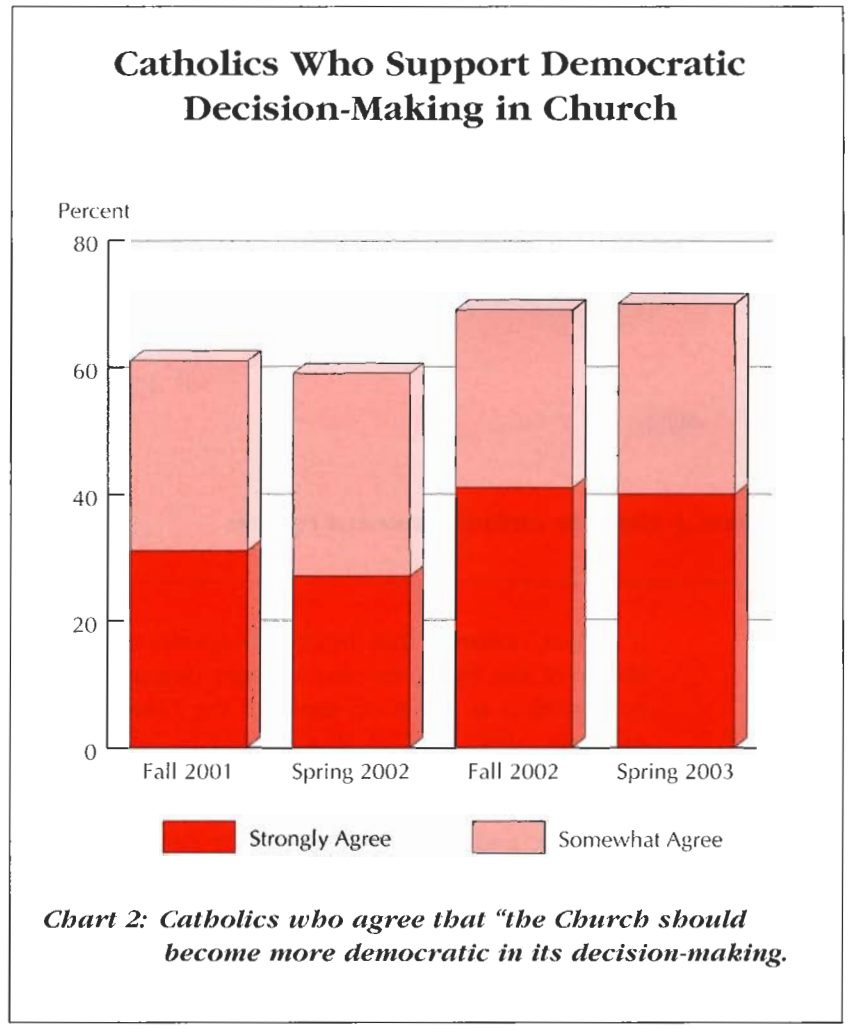

Chart 2: Catholics who agree that "the Church should become more democratic in its decision-making.

METHODOLOGY

Zogby International surveys employ sampling strategies in which selection probabilities are proportional to population size within area codes and exchanges. As many as four calls are made to reach a sampled phone number. Response rates are calculated using one of AAPOR's approved methodologies and are comparable to other professional public-opinion surveys conducted using similar sampling strategies. Weighting by *region, age, race/ethnicity,* and *gender* is used to adjust for non-response. Cross-validation analyses indicate that CCT response patterns are highly consistent with other recent, major national surveys of American Catholics. Zogby International's sampling and weighting procedures also have been validated through its political polling: more than 95 percent of the firm's polls have come within 1 percent of actual election-day outcomes. For further information on CCT's polls and methodology, visit the web page at http://www.lemoyne.edu/academics/zogby.htm.

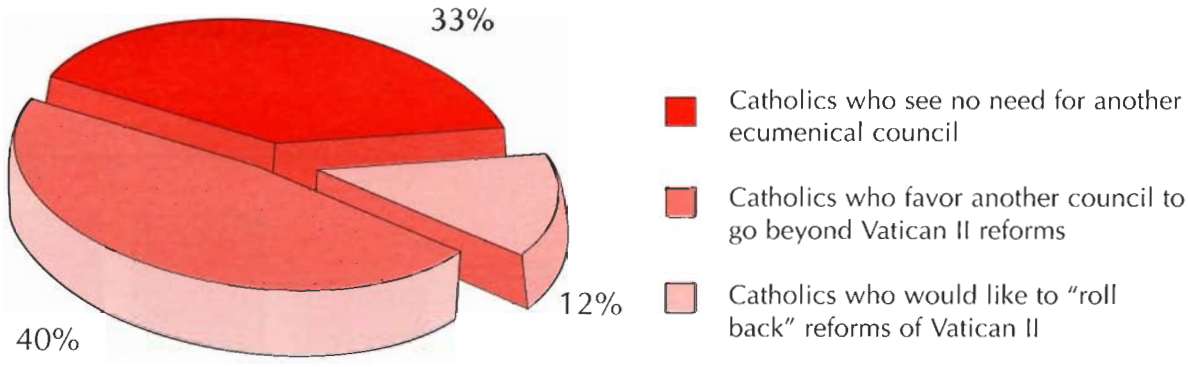

Chart 3: Catholic attitudes toward reform.

It is clear, however, that they desire greater accountability of the hierarchy and a larger degree of lay participation in the governance of the Church. For example, about half of all Catholics in November 2002 were aware of organizations such as Voice of the Faithful that seek greater accountability from the hierarchy, and a strong majority (81 percent) supported greater openness in diocesan financial matters and administration. Moreover, most thought that there should be greater shared authority with the laity in the American Catholic Church. In all of CCT's surveys, most American Catholics agree that "the Church should become more democratic in its decision-making" (see Chart 2).

Not only in response to the scandal, but also more generally, Catholic laity are demanding a more influential role in the conduct of Church affairs. The prominent role of lay persons on the National Review Board for the Protection of Children and Young People and the recently published recommendations in the Board's report provide further evidence of the mood of the laity.

Beyond the tragedy of the sex abuse scandal and its aftermath, of course, lies the crisis of the shortage of priests. Our data reveal that a substantial proportion of American Catholics favor reforms that many have proposed to help address that shortage. For example, in our baseline 2001 survey, a majority of Catholics disagreed with the proposition that only men should be ordained as priests, with the level of disagreement rising with level of education and income. Moreover, throughout all of our surveys, a clear majority of Catholics disagree (one-third "strongly") with the statement that priests should remain unmarried. Such changes remain unlikely apart from another ecumenical council of bishops. Nevertheless, many American Catholics support convening such a council for the purpose of carrying out reforms beyond those begun at Vatican Council II (see Chart 3).

Beyond such observations, however, we do not know much about Catholics' attitudes regarding current means of coping with the priest shortage or current avenues for lay participation in the governance of the Church. How, for instance, is their experience of Catholicism affected by less emphasis upon the sacraments? What do they think about lay-administered parishes? What do they think about proposals for reconceiving Christian ministry or expanding the Church's understanding of ordination to various kinds of ministry? How do they regard their experience on parish or diocesan councils? Do they think that such structures work at all? What sort of specific reforms in Church administration would American Catholics support? Much remains to be learned, and Jesuit colleges and universities can contribute to this process of institutional discernment by employing their expertise in a variety of disciplines to help the Church, as the people of God, to meet its current challenges.

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