

**Reflections on “Joy and Grievance in an American Diocese”:  
Results from the Benedictine University Online Surveys of  
Active and Inactive Catholics in Central Illinois**

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As Bishop of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, I am grateful for this opportunity to offer my reflections on the results from the online surveys of active and inactive Catholics in Central Illinois conducted by researchers from Benedictine University in Lisle and published under the title, “Joy and Grievance in an American Diocese.” I am especially thankful to Dr. William Carroll, President of Benedictine University, for authorizing this study, and to Dr. Phillip Hardy of the Department of Political Science and Dr. Kelly Kandra and Dr. Brian Patterson of the Department of Psychology, Sociology and Criminal Justice, for gathering, analyzing and summarizing the survey responses from several hundred participants.

The scholarly analysis of the survey is helpful and important, but this study is not a mere academic exercise addressing some theoretical issue. The survey was prompted by a very real pastoral concern that I noted in

our diocese's 2011 "October Count," which reported a 30 percent decline in attendance at weekend Mass over a fifteen year period since 1996. At the same time, some parishes in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois experienced no change in attendance and others experienced an increase of as much as 82 percent. So some parishes were growing while others were diminishing in numbers.

The census is conducted annually by Catholic dioceses nationwide during the month of October to assess how many Catholics are active or inactive in their local parishes. But the "October Count" only tells us how many people are coming to church, not why they come or don't come. So a real desire to get to the motivation behind the numbers of the 2011 information led me to ask Dr. Carroll if Benedictine University would help to develop a strategy to dig deeper to find the underlying reasons and causes for the attrition in attendance at some parishes and growth in others. Thus I thought it was essential to hear not only from those who have stopped attending Mass, but also to hear from those who do attend regularly to find out what draws them and keeps them coming to church. If

we are doing something right for some people, that should help us learn what we need to do to bring back those who have drifted away.

Now that we have the results and analysis of the active and inactive surveys, it is essential that you hear from me as the Bishop of this diocese, since it is up to me, with the cooperation and collaboration of the clergy, consecrated religious and lay leaders of our diocese and parishes, to learn from these findings and then do something to make a positive difference for the future of this local church in central Illinois.

At the outset, I note that respondents of both the active and inactive surveys mentioned that they disagreed or were at least troubled by some Church doctrines. A facile but inadequate answer to this finding would be that if the Church changed these doctrines, more people would join or return to the Catholic Church. Such an approach might seem easy enough for the Pope and Bishops simply to revise or revoke controversial teachings that people find hard to accept. But this approach is inadequate for several reasons. It is illusory to think that relaxing the demands of the Gospel will have a magnetic effect. Some denominations have tried this approach with less than favorable results. Even if this approach were shown to be

effective, the problem is that the Church is not free to change doctrines that come from divine law as established by God or were instituted by Jesus Christ as found in Sacred Scripture.

Jesus Himself provides examples of the proper response to those who find it hard to accept difficult teachings. In the Gospel of Saint John, Jesus tells His disciples that they will have no life in them if they do not “eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood” (John 6:53). “After hearing His words, many of the disciples remarked, ‘This sort of talk is hard to endure! How can anyone take it seriously?’ . . . From this time on, many of His disciples broke away and would not remain in His company any longer” (John 6:60, 66).

Similarly, the story of Jesus and the rich young man appears in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. After Jesus tells the young man that, if he seeks perfection, he should sell his possessions and give to the poor, we are told that “the young man went away sad, for his possessions were many” (Matthew 19:16–30; cf. Mark 10:17–31 and Luke 18:18–30).

Notice in these examples that Jesus did not run after these people and offer to soften these challenging demands of the Gospel in order to try to

win them back. After telling His disciples how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God, Jesus assures them that they can be saved through God's grace, saying, "For man it is impossible, but for God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26).

My point here is not that we should just shrug our shoulders when people walk away from Jesus and the Church He founded. Their departure is indeed troubling and a cause for sadness, but God gives everyone the freedom to make this choice. The challenge for us in the Church is to make sure that we are presenting these teachings in ways that are clear and accurate so that they can be properly understood. Some people are rejecting what they think the Church teaches, but which in fact may be a false understanding. Other times they do not know the reasons that underlie Church doctrine. We need to do a better job of explaining not only what the Church teaches, but why.

Saying that we are not free to change doctrines of divine law does not mean that there is nothing we can do to bring back Catholics who have left the practice of their faith. Indeed, there is much that we can and must do.

In looking at the results of the two surveys taken together, often the very reasons why some people have willingly chosen to separate themselves from the Catholic Church are the same reasons why others willingly remain within the Catholic Church. For example, 34 percent of those who have left the Church cited the Church's opposition to abortion as one of the reasons why they left,<sup>1</sup> while 91 percent of active Catholics said they agreed with the Church's opposition to abortion.<sup>2</sup>

Some responses are outright contradictory. One open-ended response said, "Liturgy without music is like going to the gym and not exercising."<sup>3</sup> The very next response says, "I am 73 and was used to a silent Mass."<sup>4</sup> This proves the adage that you can't please all of the people all of the time!

A sense of community or lack of it was a prominent factor mentioned both by active and inactive Catholics. Most of the active Catholic respondents indicated that a "sense of community was the most important reason why they attend their parish and what they most liked about their parish."<sup>5</sup> Conversely, one of the main reasons "why individuals stopped attending Mass or distanced themselves was a lack of connection to the Catholic Church."<sup>6</sup> Thus, we need to make sure that our parishes are

inviting communities where people feel a sense of connection and companionship as we walk our journey of faith.

For active Catholics, there were some who value the school associated with their parish as their most important reason for attending.<sup>7</sup> For others, it is the physical beauty of their church that they like they most.<sup>8</sup> Many respondents indicated that the “sacraments, especially the Eucharist,” were “especially important to their Catholic beliefs of practices.”<sup>9</sup> Yet, the Mass was cited by only 68 out of 693 responses (9.8%) of what parishioners liked most about their parish.<sup>10</sup> The instruction given by Jesus to the Apostles at the Last Supper was clear and straightforward: “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). We need to celebrate Mass with sufficient preparation and reverence with full participation so that the Christian faithful can truly appreciate the Eucharist as “the source and summit of the Christian life.”<sup>11</sup>

In this regard, the most compelling reasons for going to church in my opinion were expressed in these open-ended responses: “I attend to serve Jesus and the people. I attend to be close to Jesus, and partake of the Eucharist. I go to honor God as he has commanded. I enjoy the people

around me, I go to be inspired throughout the week.”<sup>12</sup> “I love God and I can’t imagine not wanting to spend time with Him in his house of worship.”<sup>13</sup>

The role of the parish priest in attracting or alienating churchgoers was also mentioned in both surveys. This is not just a matter of giving good homilies, although that certainly is important. The most important quality for a parish priest is for people to know and feel that he loves and cares for them. This does not mean that he never challenges them, but even when he is calling them to higher ideals and a virtuous life, he does so in a way that communicates his concern for their true and lasting happiness.

Scandals in the Church were cited as one of the major reasons why respondents stopped attending Mass or distanced themselves from the Catholic Church.<sup>14</sup> There are no excuses for inexcusable behavior. On behalf of the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, I sincerely apologize for the sexual abuse of minors, misappropriation of parish funds, acts of racial discrimination and other serious sins committed by priests and other Church personnel that have harmed the people of God. I am truly sorry that bishops and other leaders in the Church did not



always address these problems adequately or appropriately. For the past several years, our diocese has vigorously implemented the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* established by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2002. I pledge to continue these efforts diligently. In this regard, I am pleased to report that an on-site audit conducted by the outside firm of StoneBridge Business Partners from New York earlier this month found the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois to be “compliant with all audited Articles within the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* for the 2013/2014 audit period.”<sup>15</sup>

Another factor frequently mentioned by those who no longer attend Mass is that “Catholic Church attendance did not feed” their faith.<sup>16</sup> This is perplexing in that Catholic doctrine teaches that we receive the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion. Indeed, “Spiritual fulfillment/growth” was the second-most frequently cited factor (after a sense of community) among the most important reasons given for parish attendance.<sup>17</sup> Ironically and in contrast to those who felt the Catholic Church was too demanding, some who have joined other Christian denominations think that Catholics should be more committed disciples,

“conducting themselves as a New Testament Church, encouraging all to read the Bible.”<sup>18</sup> We are a Church of sinners saved by Christ, but we must never tire of seeking to become more virtuous and dedicated disciples of Jesus.

Bringing disaffected Catholics back to the Church will not be easy, but we must not shrink from this challenge. In this regard, we have begun to take some important steps to address this task. This past September, our Convocation of Priests addressed the topic of “Strategic Planning for Growth in the Church.” Professor Charles Bamford of the University of Notre Dame’s Mendoza School of Business spoke on this topic, offering a strategy of resource-based analysis that has proved successful in both the business world and the not-for-profit sector. He was followed by Father Robert Spitzer, a Jesuit priest who spoke on “Building a Culture of Growth in the Church.”

Just last week, our Diocesan Adult Enrichment Conference on the topic of “Growing Communities of Faith,” addressed two important elements of the work of evangelization: First, that as communities of missionary disciples, we are called to grow in our faith in Jesus Christ and

conform our lives to his example and teachings. Second, we recognize the call to “make disciples of all nations” and add to the Body of Christ by reaching out to others.

My next pastoral letter, on “Building a Culture of Growth in the Church,” will outline a vision and a strategy for the Church to grow qualitatively by deepening the faith of individuals and the commitment of the community, and quantitatively by increasing the number of active practicing Catholics.

In conclusion, I note that the 2013 October Count indicated a 1.5 percent increase in Mass attendance, marking the first increase since 2000! While that may seem small, it is significant in that it breaks a negative trend. In the past four years, we have also doubled the number of seminarians studying to become priests for our diocese! So I am encouraged by these hopeful signs that, with the help of God’s grace, we can rebuild and renew a community of dedicated and intentional disciples of Jesus Christ, always grateful for God’s gifts as faithful stewards of His beautiful creation!

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Phillip R. Hardy, Ph.D., Kelly L. Landra, Ph.D., and Brian G. Patterson, Ph.D., *Joy and Grievance in an American Diocese: Results from Online Surveys of Active and Inactive Catholics in Central Illinois* (Lisle, Illinois: Benedictine University, 2014), p. 18, Figure 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Joy and Grievance in an American Diocese*, p. 44, Figure 26a.

<sup>3</sup> *Joy and Grievance in an American Diocese*, p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> *Joy and Grievance in an American Diocese*, p. 47.

<sup>5</sup> *Joy and Grievance in an American Diocese*, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Joy and Grievance in an American Diocese*, p. 20.

<sup>7</sup> *Joy and Grievance in an American Diocese*, p. 33.

<sup>8</sup> *Joy and Grievance in an American Diocese*, p. 34.

<sup>9</sup> *Joy and Grievance in an American Diocese*, p. 7; see also p. 41, Figure 22.

<sup>10</sup> *Joy and Grievance in an American Diocese*, p. 34, Figure 16.

<sup>11</sup> Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 11.

<sup>12</sup> *Joy and Grievance in an American Diocese*, p. 33.

<sup>13</sup> *Joy and Grievance in an American Diocese*, p. 34.

<sup>14</sup> *Joy and Grievance in an American Diocese*, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Letter from StoneBridge Business Partners, Rochester, New York, to Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki, November 12, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> *Joy and Grievance in an American Diocese*, p. 20.

<sup>17</sup> *Joy and Grievance in an American Diocese*, p. 30, Figure 10.

<sup>18</sup> *Joy and Grievance in an American Diocese*, p. 27.