

# **The Catholic Situation in North America: *Magnificent Opportunity, Breath-taking Responsibility***

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this paper, the author focuses on Catholic and social trends in North America and some of implications of those trends for evangelization and mission. He begins by examining Roman Catholic trends regarding identification, attendance, belief, and receptivity. He then looks at ten social trends that have characterized Canada since the 1960s, trends which he suggests are also applicable to varying degrees to the United States. Six of the trends involve significant shifts in the direction of greater levels of diversity, individualism, discernment, gratification, time expectations, and information. Four additional trends, he maintains, point to important continuities regarding what people want, civility, family life, and religion/spirituality. He concludes with a brief discussion of three major implications and some of the related challenges that the Catholic Church faces as it attempts to engage in more effective evangelization and mission.

## **Introduction**

It is an honour for me to be here. I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss the findings of my research on cultural developments and Catholic developments, and the implications for the Church's ministry in North America.

The research findings remind us that you are a remarkably privileged religious body. You number around one billion people worldwide. Approximately 75 million Americans identify themselves as Roman Catholics, as do more than 14 million of Canadians — about 25% and 50%, respectively, of the two country's total populations. In Canada, some seven million Catholics live in Quebec, the remaining seven million elsewhere. But as you know well, to whom much is given, much also is expected. With privilege comes responsibility — the need to be good stewards of those millions of people entrusted to you, one at a time.

What I would like to do is to begin by looking at some important Catholic trends in North America, and then turn to some key social trends. Against that backdrop, I want to proceed to focus on what I see as three major implications and challenges for the Catholic Church as it attempts to engage in effective evangelization and mission.

## **Catholic Trends**

By a variety of measures, Roman Catholicism in Canada and the United States knows very good health.

### **Identification**

To begin with, your North American numbers remain steady and strong. In Canada, census figures show that Catholics made up 42% of the population in 1871, 43% in 1951, and 44% as of the latest, 2001 census. By way of putting things in perspective, the next two groups with the largest number of affiliates (people who identify with them) are the United and Anglican churches, at 10% and 7% respectively. Baptists and Muslims each comprise only about 2% of the population, Jews 1%. Quebec continues to stand out as a Catholic stronghold, with 83% of the people in that province identifying with the Roman Catholic faith (Statistics Canada 2003).

In the United States, approximately one in four Americans are Catholic and two in four Protestant. The Catholic share of the population has remained very steady over at least the past fifty years. According to Gallup, it stood at 25% in 1950, peaked at 28% in 1980, and has been around 25% since 1990 (Lyons 2005). Gallup also reports that the greatest concentration of Catholics is found in the northeast, led by Rhode Island (52%), Massachusetts (48%), New Jersey and Connecticut (46%), and New York (40%). Wisconsin (34%), Louisiana (33%), and New Mexico (32%) are the only states outside the northeast to crack "The Catholic Top Ten" (Jones 2004).

A major difference between the two countries is that a slight majority of Protestants in the United States identify with Conservative, evangelical groups, whereas in Canada the majority of Protestants identify with Mainline Protestant groups. The proportion of people who acknowledge ties with Other World Faiths is similar in both national settings (around 7%), while the percentage who say they have no religion is slightly higher in Canada (16%) than in the U.S. (11%).

**Table 1. Religion Identification in Canada and the United States**

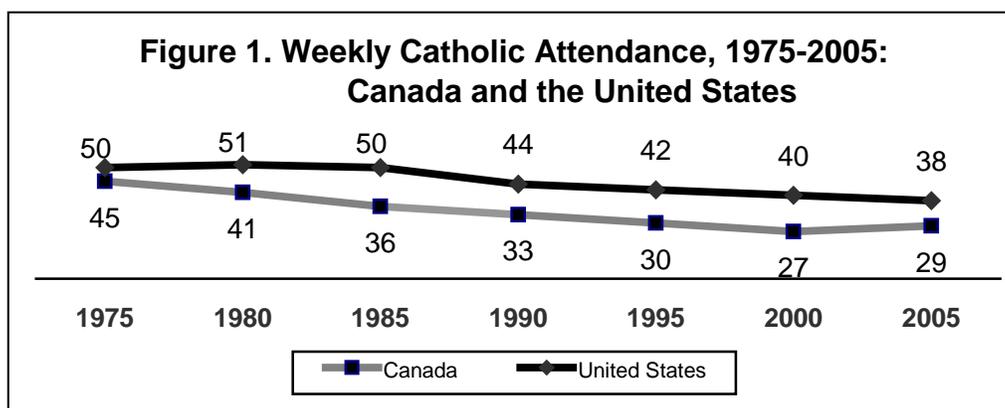
	Canada	U.S.
Christian	78%	82
Catholic	44	24
Protestant	28	49
<i>Mainline</i>	20	22
<i>Conservative</i>	8	27
Other Christian	6	9
Other Faiths	6	7
No Religion	16	11

Sources: Canada - Statistics Canada, 2001 census; U.S. Gallup, 2007.

**Attendance**

Beyond identification, your North American participation levels are strong, with some problem spots. In Canada, contrary to widespread perception, weekly (25%) and monthly (35%) attendance levels for the population as a whole have remained fairly stable since the early 1980s (see Bibby 2006:201). Protestant attendance levels have not changed very much overall, in part because greater participation among evangelical groups has offset declines in participation among their Mainline counterparts. In the Catholic case, monthly-plus attendance outside Quebec has remained at just over 50% since the 1980s, while weekly attendance is currently around 40%. However, monthly-plus attendance has fallen fairly dramatically in Quebec — from approximately 45% in 1985 to 40% in 1995 and to 25% in 2005. Weekly attendance is down to around 15%

(Bibby 2007). What stands out in Quebec is the sharp drop-off in attendance between the Pre-Boomer generation and the subsequent Boomer and Post-Boomer cohorts. In the United States, General Social Survey data show that weekly Catholic attendance was around 50% through the mid-1980s, but has slipped to about 40% since the mid-90s (NORC 2007). That level is close to the same for English-speaking Canada, but about ten percentage points higher than the overall national level for Canadian Catholics.



A blunt but important question that needs to be raised is the impact of the 2002 sexual abuse allegations in the United States on Catholic attendance. The Gallup organization (2004) reports that Catholic attendance "in the last seven days" dropped from 52% in August of 2000 to 41% in December of 2002. In February of 2003, Gallup reported that only 35% of Catholics acknowledged that they had attended mass in the previous week — the lowest level ever found for Catholics Gallup began polling in the 1930s. However, by November of 2003, Catholic attendance had rebounded to 45%, leading George Gallup, Jr. (2004:1) to write, "It appears that the effect on most Catholics' religious practices was largely a short-term one. Recent downtrends in Catholic church attendance and membership appear, for the time being, to have halted or even reversed."

### **Belonging and Believing**

An intriguing phenomenon is that large numbers of North American Catholics who are not actively involved in the Church not only continue to see themselves as Catholics but also continue to hold many conventional beliefs.

In Canada, for example, among Catholics who attend services almost every week or more, 93% outside Quebec and 98% in Quebec say they are not open to the possibility of switching to another religious tradition. That should not surprise anyone. But among Catholics who attend services *less than once a week*, the proportion outside Quebec who say they are not open to switching comes in at 83%; in Quebec the figure is no less than 97% (Bibby 2004b:38)!

Moreover, the majority of less active Roman Catholics in both Canada and the United States continue to endorse belief in God, the divinity of Jesus, and life after death. Most readily acknowledge that they have spiritual needs. Approximately one in two maintain they have experienced the presence of God, and as many as 40% claim that they pray privately at least once a week. Very large numbers indicate they are looking to the church for rites relating to birth, marriage, and death. Only a small minority say they never attend mass (for details, see Bibby 2007).

**Table 2. Beliefs and Practices, 2004: U.S. Catholics by Attendance**

	ALL	Monthly+	<Monthly
Believe: God or a higher power exists	98%	98	97
In life after death	86	89	81
Feel close to God: very or somewhat	97	99	89
Feel God's love directly: most days-plus	67	77	48
Want to feel closer to God: most days-plus	65	77	49
Pray privately: weekly-plus	86	94	74
Ask for God's help in midst daily activities	60	66	50
Never attend: worship services	8	0	19

Source: Computed from the GSS, National Opinion Research Center, Chicago, 2004.

### Receptivity to Greater Involvement

The research indicates that large numbers of less involved Catholics are open to greater participation in the Church. Nationally in Canada, 62% of adults and 40% of teenagers, 15 to 19, who attend services less than once a month say that they are receptive to greater involvement. There is a very important, qualified "if"... *if they can find it to worthwhile*. Those people include 75% of Catholic adults outside Quebec and 63% of Catholic adults in Quebec. In addition, we are talking about 51% of teenage Catholics outside Quebec and 41% of teenage Catholics in Quebec (Bibby 2006, 2007).

As I understand it, these are precisely the people who are the primary targets of the so-called “new evangelization.” In the Church’s *Directory for Catechesis*, released by Vatican in 1997, normal forms of evangelism were acknowledged as important. But specific attention was also given to Catholic adults “*in need of different types of Christian formation*” — people in “*an intermediate situation.*”

*Entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church and live a life far removed from Christ and His Gospel. Such situations require ‘a new evangelization’.*

Consequently, it is clear that the starting place for Catholic evangelization will be less active Catholics. In view of the fact that “the Catholic pool” of such affiliates consists of millions of people, the Church faces an extremely demanding but potentially intriguing task. As possible, its evangelization efforts obviously need to extend beyond the broad Roman Catholic community, extending to non-Catholics who are in need of ministry and open to involvement in the Catholic Church. But evangelization needs to begin with the people with whom you have the greatest access and affinity — Catholics who are not highly involved in the Church.

It is critically important for everyone to know that our research shows that such people are not looking for churches. They are looking for ministry. Currently, Canada’s largest Protestant denomination, the United Church, is engaging in a highly publicized initiative called “Emerging Spirit.” One major emphasis is the importance of developing welcoming congregations. I am among those who applaud the denomination for its energetic and creative efforts to reach out to Canadians. But the research doesn’t point to inactive Canadians or Americans looking for welcoming congregations. Such an emphasis on being welcoming reminds all of us of a simple but important point: if you are going to welcome people, make sure you have something for them when they arrive.

We now have a fairly extensive amount of research findings on Canadians who are not highly involved in religious groups. I have no doubt the findings also apply to the U.S. As mentioned earlier, we know that more than six in ten say they are open to the possibility of being more involved. However, they go on to say that they have to find such involvement to be meaningful in the sense that it touches their lives. What do they have in mind? Three things: the addressing of spiritual, personal, and relational

interests and needs. A good rule of thumb is that some aspect of family ministry is centrally important for most.

In 2004, I completed a major national study on family life with the Vanier Institute of the Family. The study reminded us that there is nothing more important to Canadians than families (Bibby 2004). Consequently, I have been underlining a simple but significant implication for religious groups: if you want to touch people's lives, touch their families. Carry out good and effective ministry to people of all ages, addressing, to the extent you are able, their diverse characteristics and needs. If you can enhance the lives of children, young adults, Boomers, and those who are older, in the process elevating family life for everyone involved, you will be indispensable. It is all about ministry.

In sum, your North American numbers remain strong. Catholics continue to think they are Catholics. Your participation levels are strong, with some problem spots, notably Quebec. Belonging and believing are widespread among Catholics who are not active members. Large numbers are receptive to greater involvement, if they can such involvement elevates their lives.

## **Social Trends**

The basic assertion of the sociologist is that social life always has a context. What is happening in individuals lives and in institutions is in large part shaped by what is happening in our society as a whole.

Since the 1970s, I have been monitoring social trends in Canada through a number of national surveys carried out every five years. These surveys of adults have been complemented by national surveys of teenagers in 1984, 1992, and 2000; a fourth is tentatively scheduled for 2008. I have pulled together all the findings in a new book entitled, *The Boomer Factor: What Canada's Most Famous Generation is Leaving Behind*, that was published in late 2006. I maintain that there are ten major social trends characterizing life in Canada. Six involve major shifts where life has been changing; four represent major continuities where things have remained pretty much the same. All ten have important implications for individuals and institutions, including, of course,

churches. To a large extent, I think the trends also describe developments in American life as well; you be the judge.

In the time that I have, I can only highlight the trends. The details are found in *The Boomer Factor*.

## **1. From Dominance to Diversity**

### *The Endorsement and Expansion of Pluralism*

Many of us knew a Canada in the 1950s and 60s that was very different from today. Immigrants were often referred to in disparaging terms such as "DPs." Interracial dating and marriage were rare. Women were not treated as equal to men in the workplace and elsewhere. Gays were openly ridiculed as "fruits" and "faggots." The nuclear family was regarded as the family norm.

Over the past four decades, things have changed. Boomers born between approximately 1946 and 1965 were dramatically influenced by the 1960s "rights" revolutions in the United States — civil rights, the sexual revolution, women's liberation, and the counterculture revolution. To varying degrees they also grew up with bilingualism, multiculturalism, and the Charter. The net result is that pluralism has become pervasive. We are not expected to approve of everything. But this side of the law, we are expected to at least be willing to tolerate and accept difference.

## **2. From "We" to "Me"**

### *The Acceptance and Acceleration of Individualism*

Many of us knew a Canada in 1950s and 60s that was very different from today. Membership in groups was pervasive. Community and citizenship were valued. Belief in truth, and right and wrong, was fairly common.

Boomers have helped create a pervasive mindset of individual freedom. We increasingly are free to live out life as we see fit, with a minimum of group pressures. What's more, technology has both contributed and responded to individualism. We can control and customize our social spheres. The results have included a decrease in formal membership in almost every kind of group, a sense that everything is relative, cell-phone conversations with select friends and the ignoring of people we don't know. The social is still highly valued. But it is constructed along highly personal lines.

### 3. From Deference to Discernment

#### *The Geometric Jump in Performance Expectations*

Many of us knew a Canada in 1950s and 60s that was very different from today. A buzzword was “respect” — respect for elders, parents, teachers, ministers, doctors, police, journalists — pretty much everyone who was an adult. Why? “Because they were adults and occupied positions that warranted respect.” People were also highly deferential toward institutions — schools, universities, governments, churches.

For Boomers, higher levels of individual freedom have included freedom of expression. Better educated, exposed to television and travel, and equipped in recent years with the Internet, Boomers have led the way in Canadians insisting that they have a voice in all realms of life. They want input. They also are demanding. It shows up in their sense that people in authority have to earn our respect these days, and the belief that critical thinking, whereby we evaluate our leaders and experts, is generally a good thing. No one gets an exemption.

#### **Figure 2. The Changing Status of American Catholics**

- **From Small to Large**...40,000 in 1776 to 75 million in 2005
- **From Poverty to Prosperity**...immigrants, low SES to among most prosperous
- **From the Margins to the Middle**...outsiders to full-fledged members
- **From Segregation to Integration**...self-contained community to walls down
- **From White Europeans to People of Color**...European to varied sources

Source: William D'Antonio, James D. Davidson, Dean R. Hoge, Katherine Meyer, *American Catholics*, 2001:2-7.

### 4. From Obligation to Gratification

#### *The Emergence of a Consumption Mindset*

Many of us knew a Canada in 1950s and 60s that was very different from today. People frequently were motivated by loyalty, obligation, duty — even altruism. Such themes were common in the appeals of organizations and companies, along with sports teams needed franchise support, such as the Calgary Stampeders or Hamilton Tiger-Cats. They also were assumed to be centrally important to successful relationships, including marriage.

The Boomer era has seen themes like duty and loyalty replaced by a market model that has become the prototype for organizations in every segment of our society. That model stresses the importance of determining needs and then meeting them. Successful organizations emphasize what's in it for us. Here again, no one or no organization receives a reprieve.

## **5. From Tomorrow to Today**

### *The Remarkable Rise in Time Expectations*

Many of us knew a Canada in 1950s and 60s that was very different from today. Life was busy. But people had hiding places. They also had resting places. Performances took as long as they took.

Today, our individualistic and consumption-oriented culture has teamed up with technology in asking us to do much more than our parents and grandparents did in the same amount of time. What's more, that new dynamic duo, the cell phone and e-mail, can track us down anywhere, anytime. We have lost our hiding places and our excuses for not producing immediate turnarounds. It's adding up to busy lives with a considerable amount of stress. Some 90% of women and men across the country say the pace of life has increased in the past ten years; almost 50% say they never seem to have enough time. A major contributor, of course, has been the increase in the number of women employed outside the home. In 1900 the figure stood at 15%; from 1930 through 1960 it stood at around 30%; for the past twenty years or so it has reached 60%. The time shortage means everyone has less time for everything, while feeling, in Ron Rolheiser's colourphrase phrase, "pathologically overextended."

## **6. From Knowing Too Little to Knowing Too Much**

### *The Information Explosion and Its After-Effects*

Many of us knew a Canada in 1950s and 60s that was very different from today. Less than 15% of the population had completed high school and less than 5% had university degrees. Television was a rarity and was cable non-existent. There was no Internet, no cell-phones, no personal computers. The best information sources were radio, libraries, and access to some knowledgeable friends.

In less than fifty years, Canada has gone from being an information wasteland to a nation with almost unlimited means of accessing unlimited information. Educational levels have risen significantly. But what we have been learning in our schools has been supplemented in ways beyond the wildest imaginations of our grandparents with the arrival and ongoing evolution of television and the Internet. We never have had so many issues; we also have never had so many experts who can address the issues they have raised. Such is the nature of our information economy.

But the explosion of information leaves us with at least three important questions. First, how do we ensure that our society does not evolve into a myriad of information ghettos, where our reading, viewing, listening, websites, and school systems function to isolate us from each other? Second, to what extent are we matching our emphasis on acquiring information with an emphasis on encouraging people to think — to be able to reflect, evaluate, and synthesize? Third, given the amount of information we are generating and accessing, to what extent are we doing all that we can to go beyond glorifying information per se and ensuring that it translates into enhancing life, personally and collectively — locally, nationally, and globally.

**Figure 3. Changes in the American Catholic Church**

*From Institution to the “People of God”...organization to people*  
*From Compliance to Conscience...obedience to following one’s conscience*  
*From Centralization to Decentralization of Authority...dictation to dialogue*  
*From Male Clergy to Female Lay Leaders...priests to women lay ministers*  
*From Punitive God to Loving God...punishment to love*  
*From Uniform to Culturally-Grounded Liturgy...somber to celebrative Mass*  
*From Ritual to Scriptural Devotionals...repetitious acts to the role of faith in life*  
*From Church vs Culture to Church in Culture...corrupt world to God’s Creation*  
*From Parochialism to Ecumenism...one true Church to more respect for other faiths*

Source: William D’Antonio, James D. Davidson, Dean R. Hoge, Katherine Meyer, *American Catholics*, 2001:7-16.

## **7. What People Want**

### *Three Things Are Still Supreme*

As I reminded everyone earlier, social trends do not only involve change; equally important are trends that represent continuities with the past. In Canada — and I suspect the United States as well — at least four important continuities stand out.

The first is the premier value placed on freedom, relationships, and a comfortable life. These have been the top-rated of people in the past; they still are today. Ironically, we may not be giving as much time and effort to pursuing these three goals as we would like. But, at the end of the day and the end of life, they are the things we want most.

## **8. Civility**

### *Good Social Interaction is Still Valued*

There is a lot of talk about the decline in good interpersonal life. Rudeness, lack of compassion, and crime, for example, are all believed to be on the increase. Yet for all the consternation and anxiety, characteristics such as friendliness, honesty, concern for others, and politeness are all highly valued by most Canadians. Most people also maintain that it is important to instill in children such traits as personal responsibility, respect for the environment, friendliness, acceptance of diversity, and the importance of leaving the world in better shape.

For all our general impressions and cynicism about the deterioration of interpersonal life in Canada, we continue to value it and aspire to experience it. Significantly, younger adults are just as likely to value civility as anyone else.

## **9. Family Aspirations**

### *The Hopes and Dreams are Still Alive*

The acceleration of divorce in the post-1960s, along with the increase in common-law relationships, children being born outside of marriage, and the recognition of same-sex relationships have all contributed to the widespread assumption that the traditional family unit has fallen out of favour.

However, the study that I completed in 2004 with the Vanier Institute of the Family that I mentioned earlier offered four major findings concerning family aspirations across the country. First, family remains of central importance to Canadians. Second, the hopes and dreams continue to be fairly traditional: most people still aspire to marry someone of the opposite sex, to have children, and to stay together for the rest of their lives, even if the marriage is not their first. Third, despite the dominant aspirations, the

family experiences of many people are often far from traditional. And fourth, not everyone, of course, opts for what is traditional.

But it is a serious error to equate what is happening with what people want. The conventional family aspirations are still very much alive for the vast majority of Canadians. Large numbers of them could use some help in seeing their hopes and dreams realized.

## **10. Religion and Spirituality**

### *The Gods and the Churches Are Still With Us*

Since the 1960s, the old story of secularization has been told and retold in Canada. Religion has been becoming less and less important. Church attendance is on the decline. It is pretty much over for organized religion. Observers like Durkheim, Marx, and Freud have been cited, along with North Americans such as Peter Berger and Pierre Berton. Andrew Greeley stood pretty much alone for some time among social scientists in declaring that secularization was a myth.

We now know that such claims were erroneous. Spiritual needs and ultimate questions persist. There has been a modest upswing in service attendance in Canada in the early years of the new century. In the United States, overall attendance has remained both stable and healthy since the 1930s, and has rebounded for Catholics in recent years. Proclamations of religion's demise were greatly exaggerated.

## **Three Major Implications and Challenges**

As I reflect on these findings on social and cultural change, it seems to me that the Roman Catholic Church in North America is faced with three major implications and challenges.

### **Responding to Diversity**

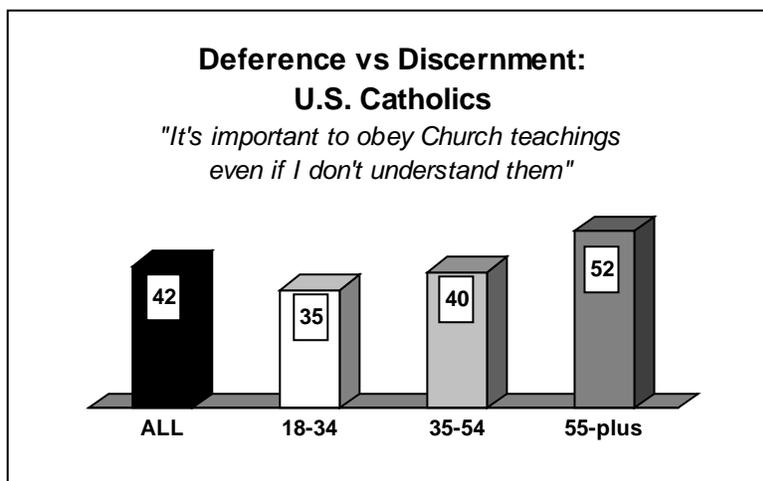
You find yourself ministering in two countries that are characterized by the legitimacy and enshrinement of diversity. That diversity, as you know well, is being expressed in a wide variety of ways. The short-list includes race and nationality, gender, sexuality, theology, and lifestyle.

Our cultures generally, including our people and our institutions, are faced with the tough task of learning how we tap our diversity, so that the end result is not mere co-existence and tolerance, but a richer life for us all. How as a Catholic Church do you embrace diversity, while at the same time remaining true to your beliefs, for example, about the role of women and sexuality? The cultures of Canada and the United States call for inclusion. How can you respond with integrity, in the process differentiating between that which is simply traditional and that which is of God?

How, also, do you play a leading role in helping us to get beyond mindless relativism, and pursue what is best and true? As our colleague and friend, Ron Rolheiser (1999:ix), reminds us, the pluralism of the day is “rich in everything, except clarity.” What light can you bring that help two societies that are in need of greater illumination?

### **Responding to the Call for Ministry**

The research indicates that Roman Catholics are among a growing number of Canadians who do not tend to be particularly responsive to appeals to duty. Discernment has replaced deference. Gratification has replaced obligation. If they are going to be involved in their parishes, they have to be able to find that their involvement contributes to their lives and the lives of their family members. I'm not exaggerating. Some 84% of Catholics across Canada who attend less than once a month agree with the statement, "People who attend religious services should go not because they feel they have to but because they find it to be worthwhile." Those sentiments are shared by 80% of Catholics who attend at least once a month. It is a pragmatism very often born of necessity: Roman Catholics are faced with ever-increasing demands on their time, their energy, and their money. Parish involvement has to add something to their lives. It is noteworthy, trend-wise, that these sentiments are more prevalent among younger Catholics than their older counterparts.



Source: Computed from GSS, National Opinion Research Center, 2000.

In light of such an emerging outlook, can the Catholic Church retain a call for commitment while at the same time responding to a clear-cut call for ministry? Is it radical — or is it reasonable — for Catholics to think that their involvement should be worthwhile for themselves and their families? An observer such as myself has had the impression that many Catholic leaders continue to insist that participation is simply expected of so-called "good Catholics," with no questions asked. Put another way, involvement in a parish is not to be conditional on the quality of ministry that is taking place in the parish. If so, how can such a widespread expectation that good ministry take place be addressed by the Church?

### **Responding to the Need for Ministry**

The fact of the matter is that, theology and ideals aside, people, including Roman Catholics who have only marginal involvement with the Church, need ministry. Some critics might want to place the responsibility for contact on individuals who are not actively involved. That's a precarious argument. Lest anyone needs to be reminded, it is not the job of the sheep to find the shepherd. People on the margins of Catholic life need a response from the Church. They readily acknowledge that they have spiritual, personal, and relational needs. Their families represent a critically important point of contact.

Not every parish has the resources to respond. Not every parish will have the inclination to respond. Openness to people who may seem different, along with creativity and flexibility, will be essential ingredients of positive and life-giving responses. But, collectively, parishes must respond.

The starting point will be getting in touch with Catholics so that they are in a position to minister as ministry is required. Our research has shown that 32% of Roman Catholics who have faced serious problems over their lifetimes say that their Church was aware of what they were encountering and provided them with support. Only 5% indicate that parishes that were aware of what they were experiencing did not support them. However, an indicting finding is that the remaining 63% of Catholics report that their Church was unaware of what they were going through. Among evangelical Protestants, for example, that unawareness figure was only 26%.

Catholics face some important and tough questions when it comes to responding better to the need and call for ministry. Do your parishes have (a) the inclination and (b) the resources to respond to ministry needs? To what extent do Catholic leaders have expertise and training in such key areas as youth ministry, worship and music, and parish administration? And, can you be open, imaginative, and flexible, while retaining your integrity?

## **Conclusion**

In my mind the research findings are decisive. You, as North American Roman Catholics, are facing a magnificent opportunity. You also are facing a breath-taking responsibility. God clearly expects a lot from the Catholic Church around the world...in North America...in Canada...in Quebec. On one occasion while he was in prison, the Apostle Paul wrote this poignant line: *"We are perplexed, but not unto despair."* These are days that understandably give rise to a measure of perplexion. But they also are days when there is reason for much hope. There certainly is little reason for despair.

What is needed now is a response to the opportunity and responsibility at hand.

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