

BIBBY'S BLOG

Research,
Reflections, &

Rants



Musings of a Multi-Focused Mind

BIBBY BLOG - "The Pope & Hope for Canadian Catholics"

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This past December, a national survey that I worked on with Angus Reid found that the 13% of Canadians who attend services about once a week were joined by no less than another 19% for Christmas services – making for a total of close to one in three people. The findings served as a reminder that there is lots of "latent religion" in Canada. What seems to be of vital importance is the response of leaders. In the case of Roman Catholics, that would seem to begin with the Papacy and, today, with Pope Francis.

Lest anyone needs to be reminded, those are gigantic numbers that readily outdistance the Canadian audience for widely-touted sports events such as the Super Bowl. The differences between normal attendance and Christmas attendance are particularly pronounced among Roman Catholics outside Quebec (48% vs. 23%) and Catholics in Quebec (38% vs 13%).

The cynics who want to minimize the significance of such turnouts for Catholics miss at least two important points. The first is that Roman Catholics continue to go on thinking they are "Catholic" whether they are in churches or not. The second point missed by cynics is that sizable numbers of Catholics say that they are open to greater involvement, if they can find it to be worthwhile. Here, they emphasize two factors: (1) ministry to spiritual, personal, and relational needs, and (2) changes in style and outlook – including being more open to diversity, being more contemporary, and being more positive.

Simply put, there is a very large pool of latent Roman Catholics in Canada, as evidenced by their appearance in Catholic churches across the country in December. To the extent that they can find that parishes are responsive to their spiritual, personal, and relational needs, and that a spirit of openness and an effort to be relevant exists, they are open to greater involvement.

To date, Pope Francis has been enthusiastically received, noted by magazines such as *Time* as providing a new voice of conscience and exuding compassion. He is short on condemnation, and chooses instead to reach out to those who are different. He consistently emphasizes that there is more to the Christian faith than a preoccupation with condemning and excluding people around themes such as homosexuality, abortion, contraception, gender and divorce, as well as the fact that they adhere to other religions. Pope Francis also has been giving primary attention to exhibiting compassion, in such diverse ways as responding to the poor, getting to know people who are different, or ensuring that divorced Catholics are not denied communion as if it were "a prize for the perfect."

The ideals of Pope Francis that have come to light so far are remarkably in touch with Canadian Catholics. His emphasis on a caring Church and practical ministry to the everyday needs of people resonate with what they have been telling us for years – these are the kinds of things that would make greater involvement worthwhile. What's more, his call to respond to those who are on "the edge of the Church" with "tenderness, mercy and compassion" rather than excluding them for falling short of Church teachings, opens up the possibility of the Catholic community becoming far more inclusive.

To the extent that Pope Francis is able to influence Catholic leaders in Canada – so that they too believe that "the church sometimes has locked itself up in small things, in small-minded rules" – and that the Church is first and foremost about ministry to those who need ministry, some fascinating things are possible. If the initial thoughts of Pope Francis can find not only ears but legs, we could see the unexpected take place: a major rejuvenation of Catholicism in Canada in the form of a faith that touches lives, precisely because it is seen as having significance.