


## Survey highlights struggles of young Hispanic Catholics

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- [Catholics in America](#) [1]

Article Details In the opening essay, we noted the importance of generation as a variable in the American Catholic surveys of the last 25 years. Today the pre-Vatican II generation is making its final appearance and the millennial generation is coming into its own. This latter cohort, numbering about 15 million in the general population, is more racially and ethnically diverse than earlier cohorts.

By the Research Team  
 [ss10282011p23ph.jpg](#) [2]

Young adults gather for the Hispanic charismatic Catholic conference in Chicago in 2009. (CNS/Catholic New World/Karen Callaway)

### Millennials

In the opening essay ([see story](#) [3]), we noted the importance of generation as a variable in the American Catholic surveys of the last 25 years. Today the pre-Vatican II generation is making its final appearance and the millennial generation is coming into its own. This latter cohort, numbering about 15 million in the general population, is more racially and ethnically diverse than earlier cohorts. Currently, Hispanics make up 45 percent of the millennial generation of U.S. Catholics. Within the next generation, it is likely that Hispanics may become the majority among American Catholics. We begin this essay with a description of the demographics that distinguish this youngest generation of adult Catholics.

Hispanic millennials differ from non-Hispanic millennial Catholics in important ways ([Table 10](#)): Only a minority of Hispanic millennials (39 percent) have never been married, while among non-Hispanics a majority (62 percent) have not been married; twice as many Hispanics (27 percent) as non-Hispanics (12 percent) are living with a partner. Nowhere is the gap between the Hispanic millennials and the descendents of the great waves from Europe more evident than in years of school completed. Twenty-nine percent of the Hispanic millennials but only 3 percent of non-Hispanics have not completed high school; 9 percent of Hispanics but 35 percent of non-Hispanics have a college degree or more.

The educational gap is reflected in the differences in annual family income: Half of the Hispanics (52 percent) but only 15 percent of non-Hispanics reported family incomes under \$25,000; at the upper end, 7 percent of Hispanics and 47 percent of non-Hispanics reported incomes of \$75,000 or more. The sociological literature is replete with studies documenting the struggles of new immigrants to close the educational and income gaps during the 20th century. The income and education gaps between young Hispanic and non-Hispanic Catholics highlight the struggle facing the Hispanic millennials in this period of social and economic turmoil in the first two decades of the 21st century.

The stark education and income differences between Hispanic and non-Hispanic millennials may help explain their different marital patterns. The income and education differences may also play a role in their political party affiliations. The figures for each party include those who said they were leaning either Democratic or Republican. Hispanics are strongly Democratic (almost three to one), while a majority of non-Hispanics (55 percent) are Republican. Our findings mirror other recent research on millennial Catholics.

We turn now to the core beliefs held by these millennials ([Figure 11](#)). Our research has shown that the four core beliefs held most strongly by American Catholics are grounded in the church's early history: Jesus' resurrection, helping the poor, Mary as the mother of God, and the sacraments. While both Hispanic and non-Hispanic millennials say these four are very important to them personally as Catholics, a greater percentage of Hispanic millennials than

non-Hispanics say each of these four is very important to them. In addition, half of the Hispanics (52 percent) but only one-third of the other millennials (33 percent) say that the Catholic teachings opposing abortion are very important to them. Almost half (49 percent) of the Hispanics say having an active prayer life is very important, while with the others it is 37 percent; and again, more Hispanics (47 percent to 25 percent) say that devotions such as praying the rosary and adoration of the Eucharist are a core part of their Catholic identity.

### Other differences

Significant majorities of millennials from both subgroups affirm that “being Catholic is an important part of who I am,” that “the sacraments are essential to my relationship with God,” that “it is important to me that younger generations of my family grow up Catholic,” and that “I cannot imagine being anything but Catholic.” In all four cases, Hispanics express a stronger sense of being Catholic than do the others ([Table 12](#)). Hispanics are much more likely to say Catholicism contains more truth than do other religions, while recognizing along with the non-Hispanics that a person may lead a life of virtue and goodness without being Catholic.

The phrase “being a good Catholic” is deeply embedded in the psyche of American Catholics, and apparently also to millennials. Hispanics are much less likely than other millennials to accept as “good Catholics” those who do not agree with the church’s teachings on divorce and remarriage without an annulment (52 percent to 76 percent), on abortion (48 percent to 64 percent), without believing in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist (33 percent to 51 percent), and without belief in Jesus’ resurrection (25 percent to 41 percent). Still, on matters like going to Mass every Sunday or using contraceptive birth control methods, large majorities of both groups see these moral issues as personal matters subject to their right to freedom of conscience.

There are a number of features of the institutional church that appear to be much more meaningful to Hispanics than other millennials ([Table 14](#)). But one item that both agree is very meaningful to them is “Catholics can disagree but remain loyal” (42 percent and 41 percent respectively). Thus, a significant minority of millennials can disagree and still find the papacy very meaningful, even as they disagree with many of the church’s teachings on sexual matters, including the priesthood, where they not only support the idea of married priests, but also the ordination of women as deacons and priests.

When it comes to the role of the church in society, Hispanics, more than non-Hispanics, advocate an activist role on behalf of social justice and a communitarian ethic. Sixty-five percent of Hispanic millennials strongly agree with the stance the U.S. bishops have taken on immigration reform, in comparison to 21 percent of the other millennials. Hispanics (62 percent) and the others (54 percent) agreed with the bishops in their opposition to the health care reform bill.

As we showed above, when it comes to helping the poor, 70 percent of the Hispanics but only 56 percent of the others say it is very important. So also, with regard to the expenditure of more government funds to provide health care for poor children, Hispanics were twice as likely as other millennials (66 percent to 30 percent) to strongly support this position.

### Mass and the millennials

Millennial Mass attendance rates are the lowest of all four generations. As we have noted elsewhere, Hispanics are a bit more likely to be found at weekend Mass than their non-Hispanic brothers and sisters. At the same time, 62 percent of the Hispanics and 41 percent of the others say the Mass is very meaningful to them, but they also agree that you don’t have to go to Mass every week to be a good Catholic.

In this survey for the first time, we asked what “important reasons” incline them to attend Mass. The two most important reasons given by both groups are “I enjoy taking part in the liturgy” (Hispanics, 59 percent; other millennials, 93 percent), and “I feel the need for Communion” (Hispanics, 70 percent; others, 85 percent). “I enjoy being with others in our church” was the third most important reason (Hispanics, 54 percent; others, 74 percent). Half of the Hispanics (54 percent) and 40 percent of the others gave “It’s a habit” as their fourth reason for going. Least important was that the church requires it, given by 37 percent of Hispanics and 31 percent of the others.

The two millennial groups also differed in the reasons they gave for not going to Mass more often. Among the Hispanics, 64 percent gave “family responsibilities” as their most important reason, with 47 percent citing “health reasons.” The other millennials (42 percent) listed as the No. 1 reason for not attending Mass more often that “I’m just not a religious person,” followed by “family responsibilities” (39 percent). The idea that “It is not a mortal sin” to miss or not attend Mass regularly was checked by one in five Hispanics and one in three other millennials.

## Summary

The 2010 U.S. Census shows that one quarter of Hispanics live in poverty. Our data show that more than a quarter of Hispanic Catholic millennials have less than a high school education (29 percent). Nearly 40 percent have only a high school education (38 percent). Less than 10 percent have a college degree. In contrast, over a third of non-Hispanic millennials (35 percent) have a college degree and 39 percent have some college. Such educational disparities show up in income. More than half of Hispanic millennials (52 percent) make less than \$25,000 a year. Approximately the same proportion of non-Hispanics (55 percent) make between \$25,000 and \$99,999.

Many Catholic Hispanic millennials and their friends and relatives are poor. They know those who struggle to work with undocumented status. Poverty is not an abstract concept -- it is a fact of their lives and it is reflected in the way Hispanics conceive of themselves as Catholics, in what they expect of the church in its ministry and use of its influence for public policy.

Stories in the [Catholics in America](#) [1] series (series home: [ncronline.org/AmericanCatholics](http://ncronline.org/AmericanCatholics) [1])

- [Catholics in America overview](#) [3]
- [Different generations in the church](#) [4]
- [What matters to American Catholics](#) [5]
- [How committed are Catholics?](#) [6]
- [Old and new spiritual resources](#) [7]
- [The sex abuse scandal](#) [8]
- [Catholics' political affiliation](#) [9]
- [How parish life has changed](#) [10]
- [Does Catholic education make a difference?](#) [11]
- [The struggles of young Hispanic Catholics](#) [12]
- [Beliefs about the Eucharist](#) [13]
- [Right and wrong: Who has final say?](#) [14]
- [About the survey](#) [15]
- [About the authors and upcoming events](#) [16]
- [A Note on Sponsorship](#) [17]

- [Table 10](#)
- [Table 12](#)
- [Table 14](#)
- [Figure 11](#)

## Table 10

	Hispanic	Non-Hispanic
<b>Race</b>		
Race / ethnicity	45%	55%
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Married	31%	26%
Never married	39	62

Divorced, widowed, separated	3	5
Living with partner	27	12
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	49%	50%
Male	51	50
<b>Education</b>		
Some high school and less	29%	3%
High school graduate	38	23
Some college, associate degree	24	39
College graduate and higher	9	35
<b>Catholic Education</b>		
Grade school	17%	39%
High school	8	21
Catholic college/university	1	12
<b>Income</b>		
Less than \$25,000	52%	15%
\$25,000-\$49,999	29	25
\$50,000-\$74,999	11	14
\$75,000-\$99,999	5	16
\$100,000 or more	2	31
<b>Party Affiliation</b>		
Republican	25%	55%
Democrat	71	43
Independent	4	2

## Table 12

### Percentages strongly or somewhat agreeing

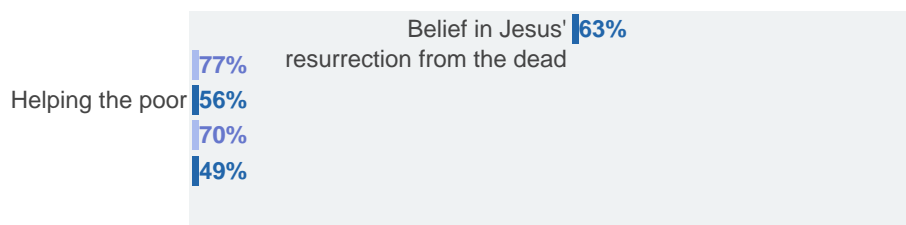
	Hispanics	Others
Being Catholic is an important part of who I am	86%	68%

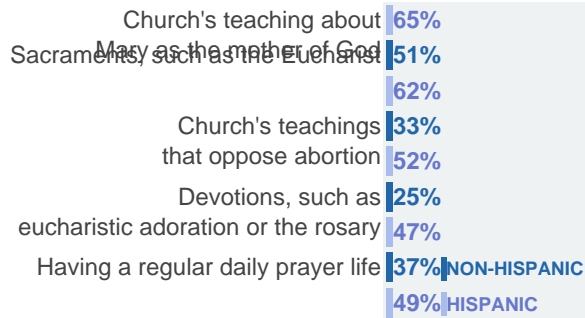
Sacraments of the church are essential to my relationship with God	86	67
Catholicism contains a greater share of truth than do other religions	83	50
Important to me that younger generations of my family grow up Catholic	83	71
I cannot imagine being anything but Catholic	77	62
How a person lives is more important than whether he or she is Catholic	77	89

Table 14

	Hispanics	Others
The church as part of an unbroken tradition	50%	36%
Church is universal	52	47
Church's active concern for the poor	56	42
Church's willingness to stand up for the unborn	51	38
The papacy	41	25
The Mass	62	41

Figure 11





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- [Catholics in America](#)

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**Links:**

- [1] <http://ncronline.org/AmericanCatholics>
- [2] <http://ncronline.org/files/ss10282011p23ph.jpg>
- [3] <http://ncronline.org/node/27176>
- [4] <http://ncronline.org/node/27162>
- [5] <http://ncronline.org/node/27165>
- [6] <http://ncronline.org/node/27166>
- [7] <http://ncronline.org/node/27167>
- [8] <http://ncronline.org/node/27168>
- [9] <http://ncronline.org/node/27172>
- [10] <http://ncronline.org/node/27169>
- [11] <http://ncronline.org/node/27170>
- [12] <http://ncronline.org/node/27171>
- [13] <http://ncronline.org/node/27173>
- [14] <http://ncronline.org/node/27174>
- [15] <http://ncronline.org/node/27160>
- [16] <http://ncronline.org/node/27159>
- [17] <http://ncronline.org/node/27230>