

Poll finds 'growing uneasiness' among Catholics over church finances

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USA TODAY

January 10, 2005

http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2005-01-10-catholics-poll_x.htm

In the wake of the clergy sexual abuse scandal, a growing number of Catholic churchgoers worry that the financial fallout will impede the work of the church, according to a survey to be released today.

The survey of 803 Roman Catholics who attend Mass at least twice a month finds "a growing uneasiness" with the way the church handles money, says Frank Butler, director of Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities, sponsor of the survey. That group's philanthropies give more than \$200 million annually to Catholic concerns.

Among the survey's findings:

- 65% say the financial effect of the scandal will impede the church's ability to meet its mission; up from 55% in a similar survey in 2002. The church faces \$900 million in costs for legal settlements and care and counseling for victims and abusive priests.

- 46% say they spend less than an hour or no time at all at parish activities each month, compared with 27% in 2002; 29% spend one to three hours, vs. 25% in 2002. Just 25% spend four hours or more, down from 57% in 2002.

- 70% say the church should be more accountable on its finances, compared with 65% in 2002. And 71% want public annual audits of every level of church finances, up from 66%. Butler says only one in three bishops follow the "best practices" auditing and financial reporting guidelines created by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

- 14% say they decreased or stopped giving at the parish level, vs. 12% in 2002. They were not asked why. But 8% say they gave more, vs. 3% in 2002.

Although the church raised about the same amount of money in 2004 as before, it came from fewer people — an alarming trend, Butler says. The economy and the scandal may have cut into the number of donors, but the abuse crisis revealed for most Catholics how little they knew about how the church is managed, he says.

When asked about bishops' responses to financial crises, 38% of respondents say selling property is acceptable; 36% favor special collections. But "parishioners would rather see their diocese declare bankruptcy" (35%) than cut services (30%) or close parishes (28%), the survey shows.

The Zogby International Poll taken in December has a margin of error of +/- 3.8 percentage points.