

The sociology of French Catholics

A study commissioned by Bayard Presse has identified six broad groupings of French Catholics.



A wide-ranging sociological study commissioned by the Bayard group and published jointly by La Croix and Pèlerin sheds unprecedented light on the makeup of French Catholicism. The two authors have distinguished six profile types, which provide tools for understanding the logic of a Catholic world that is far more diverse than may have appeared.

Who are the real Catholics in France? The five per cent who attend Mass regularly, according to opinion polls, or the 53% who describe themselves as Catholic? The broad survey carried out by Ipsos under the direction of sociologists, Philippe Cibois and Yann Raison du Cleuziou, shows that there is also a third possibility. Thus, 23% of French people can be characterized as “involved” Catholics, i.e. people who feel attached to the Church by means of their donations, their family lives or their commitments.

As a result, the study sets aside the traditional distinction between practicing and non-practicing Catholics and includes those who do not attend Mass regularly “but who consider themselves all the same as Catholics because they live out their lives differently,” as the authors note.

For the first time, then, this study offers an indication of the real influence of the Church in society and offers a new approach to the subject by defining six “families” of Catholics. It also goes beyond a schematic view of “identity” Catholics, who either vote for François Fillon and defend creches and their counterparts, the open-minded but aging “left-wing Catholics”.

In their effort to deal with a more complex and nuanced reality, Raison du Cleuzion and Cibois do not disregard the Catholic practice criterion but they enrich it considerably. Since the 1930s, Catholics have been identified, classified and studied based on their participation – or not – in Sunday Mass. Today that criterion is no longer sufficient to account for the linkages of French people with the Church. Moreover, this is one of the major findings of the survey, which Raison du Cleuzion summarizes as follows: “French Catholicism has become a festive reality.” In other words, the practice of the immense majority of French Catholics is limited to life events such as baptism, marriage, death, etc. and to the major feasts of the Church. Practicing Catholics, however, number only 1.8% of the French population.

The study identifies three “families” of French Catholics based on their diligence in Mass attendance, namely the “Conciliar Catholics,” “Observant Catholics,” and “Inspired Catholics.” These three categories also share most of their religious practices, such as praying the rosary, making pilgrimages, supporting groups, reading the Catholic press... “The more a Catholic goes to Mass, the more he or she multiplies his or her involvements,” says Raison du Cleuziou. “Nevertheless, all of them privilege Catholic practices e.g. individual devotion such as praying at home, lighting candles in Church...” Breaking another idea that is widely spread in parishes, he also emphasizes that barely practicing Catholics “are not seeking to participate more,” particularly at Mass.

A world in the form of a pyramid The Ipsos survey thus characterizes a Catholic world that takes the shape of a pyramid, the base comprising the majority of hardly-practicing Catholics and a narrow point at the top composed of “zealous,” highly involved Catholics. Nevertheless, as small a minority, as they are, the latter group are not homogeneous. What distinguishes them takes the form of a hierarchy of values that separates those who prioritize “hospitality” and those who emphasize “security”.

The issue of welcoming migrants lies at the center of this distinction. The former are generally more favorable and are often admirers of Pope Francis while the latter regard their Catholicism more as a constitutive element of an identity, and sometimes perceive migrants as a threat from this point of view. Voting preferences are also highly nuanced in all categories, although there are dominant tendencies e.g. “Conciliar Catholics” and those characterized as “Fraternal Seasonal Catholics” tend to vote more frequently for the left or the center right, while “Observant Catholics” and “Inspired Catholics” tend to vote for the right.

A wide variety of opinions and practices Generally speaking, the keys for understanding provided by this typology of six families of involved Catholics illustrates the very great diversity of opinions and practices among French Catholics. It also invites caution in the face of efforts to classify them as a homogeneous group. For example, many commentators believed that the *Manif pour Tous* (Demo for All) encompassed the majority of French Catholics. The study shows on the other hand that only six per cent of French Catholics took part in the major demonstrations against homosexual marriage while 73% did not wish to take part.

Survey methodology In implementing its survey of “involved Christians,” Ipsos took a representative sample of the metropolitan population aged over 18 years numbering 28,204 persons, and a sub-population of 15,174 persons characterizing themselves as Catholics practicing or not. This represents 53.8% of the population. This group can also be subdivided based on their mass

attendance. Another representative sample of 1,007 people from within this group representing Catholics regarded as “involved Catholics,” namely practicing Catholics (weekly, several times a month, major events and religious feasts), whether they described themselves as “involved” or not, and non-practicing Catholics who described themselves as “involved”.

The survey was carried out in June 2016 using the quota method. The margin of error for a given percentage depends on the size of the sub-sample considered. Thus, for a population of 1,000, the margin of error was around three per cent, while it may be up to five percent for a population of 500 and seven percent for a population of 200.

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