

**What *Catholic*
Women Think**
*About Faith, Conscience,
and Contraception*

**A NATIONWIDE ONLINE SURVEY OF
CHURCH-GOING CATHOLIC WOMEN (18-54)**

SURVEY FIELDDED JUNE 21-JULY 1, 2011

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THE WOMEN, FAITH, AND CULTURE PROJECT
*EXPLORING WHAT CATHOLIC WOMEN THINK***

A PRELIMINARY REPORT

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What *Catholic* *Women Think* *About Faith, Conscience,* *and Contraception*

PRELIMINARY REPORT

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Executive Summary

This report, *What Catholic Women Think About Faith, Conscience, and Contraception*, offers new data about the views of church-going Catholic women towards contraception and related Church teachings—views that present both a challenge and an opportunity for the Church. The data confirms that most Catholic women¹ do not fully support the Church's teachings on contraception and natural family planning. However, Catholic women who regularly participate in the Church's sacramental life (Mass and Confession) agree with the teachings on contraception and family planning in significantly higher numbers than women overall. Moreover, many Catholic women express partial agreement with these teachings and show encouraging receptivity to learning more about them. This receptivity offers the Church a previously unrealized opportunity to communicate those teachings more persuasively and effectively.

The data underscores, however, the formidable challenge the Church faces in the area of conscience formation, particularly about sexual matters. The popular culture's messages about sex and contraception have shaped the views of many Catholic women, setting in place an implicit framework for moral decision-making that is at odds with Church teachings. At the same time, Catholic women tend to treat the Church like a familiar relative and her teachings like unsolicited advice: women listen, but feel little obligation to follow the 'advice' given.

The *Women, Faith, and Culture* project commissioned an online survey, fielded June 21 through July 1, 2011, as part of a larger research effort to explore the views of church-going Catholic women, ages 18-54, on a variety of topics related to faith and sexuality. This project focuses solely on church-going Catholic women, as opposed to women who self-identify as Catholic regardless of Mass attendance or interaction with the institutional Church. Our survey sample (824) was split evenly between women who attend church at least weekly and those who attend church less than weekly but at least a few times per year. (Survey and statistical analysis conducted by **the polling company, inc./WomanTrend**, Washington, D.C. Margin of error $\pm 3.5\%$. See **Methodology** section for details.)

Against a backdrop of questions on faith and conscience formation, the survey assessed, first, how many church-going Catholic women could correctly identify Catholic teachings on contraception; second, how many of these women would accept or reject the teachings on contraception when those teachings were presented accurately; third, the reasons why Catholic women reject Church teaching on these issues; and fourth, whether women who reject the Church's teachings might be receptive to learning more about those teachings and, if so, what kind of information they might welcome.

Critics of the Church's teaching propose an image of Catholic women fiercely and forever opposed to the Church's teaching on contraception, and suggest (wrongly) that nearly all Catholic women use contraception. The reality is far more nuanced.

A Complex Picture

Our research found that up to one-third of church-going Catholic women (26-33%, depending on the question) hold mistaken beliefs about the Church's teaching on contraception. For example, 33% of Catholic women incorrectly believe that the Church teaches that couples have the right to decide the moral acceptability of contraception *regardless* of Church teaching.

When presented with an accurate description of the Church's teachings on family planning, many Catholic women show reluctance to completely reject the Church's teaching. Instead, three groups emerge: "the faithful" (who fully accept the Church's teaching), "the dissenters" (who completely reject the Church's teaching), and the "soft middle" (who accept "parts" but "not all" of the teaching). In addition, a significant number of women in the "soft middle" show openness to learning more about the Church's teachings on contraception and natural family planning (NFP).

Frequent sacramental practice signals greater likelihood of complete acceptance of Church teaching on contraception and family planning. While few Catholic women overall (13%) completely accept the Church's teaching, that number doubles (27%) among young (18-34) women who attend Church every week. And it climbs still higher among women who both attend Mass weekly and have been to confession within the past year—37% of these women completely accept the Church's teaching.

¹ In the context of this report, the phrase "Catholic women" refers to church-going Catholic women, as defined by the survey methodology (see "Methodology" section).

Sacramental frequency also affects the likelihood of dissent. While 37% of church-going women overall completely reject the Church's teaching on family planning, dissent is less likely among weekly Mass-goers. Just 24% of weekly Mass attendees completely reject the Church's teaching, a number that drops further (to 12%) among women who attend Mass weekly and who have been to confession in the past year.

Our data suggests that the Church might do well to focus pastoral outreach on the "soft middle," women who neither embrace the Church's teaching on contraception, nor reject it out of hand. A strong plurality (44%) of church-going women express a nuanced view of Church teachings, saying they accept "parts" but "not all" of the teaching on contraception. These women embrace their faith (90% overall say their Catholic faith is an important part of daily life) and few show hardened opposition to the Church's authority (just 18% say their partial rejection of the Church's teaching is because they do not accept the Church's moral authority on these issues).

The Opportunity: Openness

Fifty-three percent of weekly Mass-goers who accept parts but not all of Church teaching indicate some openness to learning more about the Church teachings on contraception. And two-thirds (67%) of these receptive women are already connected in some way to parish life. In short, they are reachable, given the right message and approach. The most persuasive messages may be more practical and benefits-oriented than spiritual or authoritative. Women show interest in hearing testimonies from other couples on the health and relationship benefits of natural family planning (23%) and natural family planning's effectiveness (22%). They also indicate interest in a doctor's recommendation of natural family planning and its effectiveness (23%) and studies that show natural family planning is highly effective (22%).

The Challenge: Conscience

Confusion over the morality of contraception reflects women's deeper confusion about how—or even whether—Church teaching ought to shape individual conscience in matters of sexual morality. While 63% of Church-going Catholic women say the Church's teachings on sex and reproduction "influence" them, only 21% of this

"influenced" group fully accept the Church's teaching on contraception. Moreover, 85% of church-going Catholic women believe that they can be "good Catholics" even if they do not accept some of the Church's teachings on sex and reproduction.

Both "dissenters" and women who form the "soft middle" give many reasons why they reject Church teaching on contraception. Their top reasons,² however, highlight issues of conscience formation: 53% of these women say that couples have the "moral right" to decide which methods of family planning to use—a position that disregards the Church's judgment on whether particular methods are morally licit in the first place. The second-most frequently cited reason reflects not only the culture's promise of sexual pleasure without consequences but also the degree to which women have absorbed the cultural mindset that divorces sex from procreation: 46% of women who reject the Church's teaching in whole or in part do so because they believe couples have "the right to enjoy sexual pleasure without worrying about pregnancy." The third most common reason given for not fully accepting the Church's teaching reflects a result-oriented concern: 41% of women who reject the Church's teaching in whole or in part do not think natural family planning is an effective method to space or postpone pregnancy.

Our research suggests that the local Church, in many quarters, is either not presenting Church teaching on contraception at all or not presenting it persuasively enough. The weekly Mass homily, for example, seems to represent a lost opportunity when it comes to conscience formation on the contraception issue. While 72% of Catholic women say the weekly Mass homily is their primary source for learning about the faith, just 15% of those who rely on homilies to learn about their faith say they fully accept the Church's teaching on contraception.

But resistance to the Church's teaching on contraception does not mean that Catholic women reject children. Indeed, church-going Catholic women display greater openness to children than the average American. For Catholic women, the "ideal" number of children averages 3.5 (higher than the American ideal of two or fewer). And if money were not a factor, the Catholic ideal would jump to 4.0.

² Survey respondents were allowed to select multiple reasons, so totals exceed 100%.

When Catholic women make decisions about whether and when to conceive a child, however, faulty conscience formation is again on display. Catholic women typically leave God out of the conversation. Instead, they say the most important factors to consider when deciding whether or not to try and get pregnant are finances (64%), relationship stability (56%), and marital status (41%). Only 20% of Catholic women identify “whether it seems to be God’s will” as an important factor in the decision.

Conscience formation comes into play in other areas as well. The rates of abortion and emergency contraception use among Catholic women suggest that younger Catholic women may see fewer moral issues with emergency contraception than with abortion. While 10% of church-going Catholic women have had abortions (lower than the national average), nearly 17% of younger Catholic women (18-34) have used emergency contraception (higher than the national average). The emergency contraception rate raises the concern that Catholic women may view emergency contraception as more like contraception

(which they believe prevents conception) than abortion (which destroys a life after conception). Thus, the Church must address this situation on two levels: presenting facts about the potentially abortive³ nature of emergency contraception as well as arguing more persuasively why contraception itself is wrong.

These survey results suggest important considerations for the Church’s efforts to engage Catholic women on issues of faith, conscience, and contraception. With better messaging about the practical benefits of natural family planning, the Church may be successful in introducing women to a morally licit means of family planning, perhaps as the first step towards a fuller embrace of the Church’s teaching. At the same time, however, the Church faces a steep challenge in the broader arena of sexual morality. There the Church must re-assert the integral role of Church teaching in the formation of conscience and courageously proclaim a consistent sexual ethic to Catholic women whose views today are formed more by popular culture than by the teachings of the Catholic Church.

³ A recent *New York Times* piece argues that current research provides no proof that emergency contraception interferes with implantation of a fertilized egg, thus weakening the argument that emergency contraception may be abortifacient. However, Richard Doerflinger from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities describes the research as “an unresolved debate [with] some studies on both sides.” Moreover, because conclusive testing may be unattainable, precise understanding of the mechanism of emergency contraception and questions about whether it induces abortion “may be unresolvable.”

Methodology

The research project *Women, Faith, and Culture* commissioned an online survey of church-going Catholic women in the United States, designed to explore their views on a variety of topics related to faith, conscience, sexuality, and reproduction. Fielded from June 21 through July 1, 2011, the survey and statistical analysis were conducted by **the polling company, inc./WomanTrend** of Washington, D.C. The sample of 824 church-going Catholic women ages 18-54 was drawn utilizing opt-in online panels of respondents targeted by gender, age and religion. Nested quotas were used to ensure an even mix of younger and older respondents as well as those who go to church frequently and infrequently. “Frequent” describes those who report attending church at least once a week and “infrequent” means those who report

attending church less than weekly but at least a few times a year. Data pertaining to survey topics outside the scope of this preliminary report on faith, conscience, and contraception have been withheld for internal use.

Data are **unweighted**.

The margin of error for this study is $\pm 3.5\%$.

Margins of error for subgroups (cross-tabulated results) are slightly higher.

Note: The present survey was administered only in English, without a Spanish language option. While 11% of the survey population was non-white, it did not include a proportionally representative sample of Latina/Hispanic women to match the Catholic Church’s growing Latina/Hispanic membership. Thus these survey results do not draw conclusions by ethnic background or national origin; further research is needed in those areas.

Introduction

Background

Media coverage of the [Health and Human Services](#) contraceptive [mandate](#) and the [resulting lawsuits](#) filed by Catholic institutions has spotlighted not only the Catholic Church's teachings against contraception but also the sharp divide among Catholics on this issue.

The authoritative, magisterial teaching of the Church is clear. In 1968, Pope Paul VI issued the encyclical [Humanae Vitae](#), which, contrary to the expectations of many Catholics at the time, affirmed the Catholic Church's teaching against contraception. [Humanae Vitae](#) taught that "[each and every marital act](#)" must "retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life," thus preserving the life-giving (procreative) and love-giving (unitive) meanings of sex. Pope John Paul II [reaffirmed](#) this teaching and decried the emerging "[contraceptive mentality](#)" which perceives "procreation as an [obstacle to personal fulfilment](#)." Pope Benedict has [reiterated](#) the Church's teaching on contraception just as strongly as his predecessors.

Contraception, the [Catholic Church teaches](#), is morally wrong.

The teaching against contraception, however, has not been well received within the Church. Forty-four years ago, [Humanae Vitae](#) ignited widespread dissent among theologians and ordinary Catholics alike. And 19 years ago, Fr. Richard A. McCormick, S.J., a [dissenting](#) Jesuit theologian, wrote in [America](#) magazine that the Church's teaching on contraception resulted in a "[paralyzed status quo](#)"—the hierarchy holding fast to its teaching and theologians, clerics, and Catholic couples largely dismissing it. Not surprisingly, the situation weakened the laity's perception of the Church as a [moral authority](#) on sexual matters.

Things haven't changed much these past twenty years. As [New York Times](#) writer [Frank Bruni](#) recently observed, "American Catholics have been merrily ignoring the church's official position on contraception for many years, often with the blessing of lower-level clerics."

The Church today still seems to reflect a "paralyzed status quo" on contraception. On the one hand, Catholic health

professionals have developed reliable, [highly effective](#) methods of natural family planning (NFP)—the only Church-sanctioned approach to help couples achieve, postpone, or avoid pregnancy. Dioceses have appointed natural family planning directors who coordinate NFP classes for interested Catholic couples. Scattered parishes and dioceses require engaged couples to take introductory courses in natural family planning. And the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops directly [promotes NFP](#) and assists dioceses in that effort.

Even so, the impact on Catholics in the pew seems minimal. Old-time parishioners scratch their heads trying to recall the last time they heard a Sunday homily on contraception. And parish priests seem reluctant to tackle the subject. As one priest told us, "I wouldn't dream of telling a woman she can't use contraception. That's her decision."

The decisions many Catholic women make appear, on the surface, to be unshakably pro-contraception. Catholic moms in minivans drop their children at the parish school and head to their gynecologists to be fitted for diaphragms or to get a new prescription for "the pill"—and think nothing of it.

Until now, no one has asked church-going Catholic women why they reject the teaching of the Church, whether they are open to new information that might change their minds, and if so, what kind of information might interest them. This project, *Women, Faith, and Culture*, is an effort to begin filling that knowledge gap, in service to the Church. We believe that effective evangelization requires us to hear and understand *what Catholic women think*.

The Project

The *Women, Faith, and Culture* project as a whole explores what Catholic women think about a range of Catholic teachings in areas of sexual morality, conscience, and reproduction. It encompasses other topics in addition to faith, conscience, and contraception, the topics addressed in this preliminary report. We rely on focus groups, an on-line survey, and in-depth interviews with one hundred Catholic women to provide data and qualitative insights. (Focus groups, survey, and statistical analysis provided by [the polling company, inc./WomanTrend](#), led by veteran pollster Kellyanne Conway.) This preliminary report, however, draws only upon the data from our online survey.

Our work focuses on the views of church-going Catholic women, ages 18-54, rather than the larger group of women who self-identify as Catholic—a group which would include those who call themselves Catholic but who rarely or never attend Catholic Mass and have little consistent interaction with the institutional Church. Our survey sample was split between women who attend church at least weekly and those who attend church less than weekly but at least a few times per year. (See *Methodology* section for details.)

Our decision not to include women who self-identify as Catholic but who have not attended Church at least a few times within the past year is not intended as a judgment of their personal faith or spiritual worthiness. We focused on church-going Catholic women out of an intuitive sense that their perspectives would offer greater insight on how well the Church communicates its teachings, how Catholic women who interact regularly with the Church respond to the substance of those teachings, and how these women regard Church authority on sexual and reproductive issues.

Why Now?

The vision for this project emerged from experience—our own and the shared experiences of lay people and clergy active in women’s ministries, marriage preparation programs, Catholic inquiry classes ([RCIA](#)), and natural family planning programs. In spite of decades of strong papal teaching, declining numbers of Catholics accept the Church’s teaching on sexual morality. And while adherence to the teaching on contraception in particular seems abysmally low, the poor numbers seem to have generated few new strategies to tackle the problem.

As faithful Catholics, we respect the Church’s teaching on these issues and believe that it will not change. But the Church’s approaches to communicating and “[marketing](#)” its teaching must be open to change in order to compete more effectively in the marketplace of ideas—particularly in a sexualized cultural hostile to those beliefs. [Others](#) have made similar observations.

If the Church is to share the truth of its teaching more effectively, those of us who minister to women and families need a better understanding of what women think about these issues and why. We need to hear women’s perceptions of Church teaching, understand their objections, and provide answers to their questions.

And we need to do it now, before another generation is raised in what *New York Times* columnist [Russ Douthat](#) describes as “the world that contraception has made.” In an exchange at [Slate.com](#), Douthat paints a picture remarkably similar to the one predicted forty-four years earlier in *Humanae Vitae*:

[I]n general, the world that contraception has made is a world that de-emphasizes the moral weight of the sexual act, while insisting on the centrality of a perpetually-fulfilled libido to human contentment... In general, the world that contraception has made has been a world characterized by steadily declining marriage rates, steadily rising numbers of children born out of wedlock, birthrates that have fallen well below replacement levels across the developed West...and millions upon millions upon millions of abortions. In general, the sexual culture that contraception has created is a culture that treats the stuff of human life and even life itself as a commodity to be bought, sold, mass produced, experimented upon and [kept on ice when necessary](#).

Preliminary Report

This preliminary report presents a snapshot, based on survey data, of what Catholic women think about faith, conscience, and contraception. Against a backdrop of questions on faith and conscience formation, we set out to learn four things: first, how many Catholic women could correctly identify Catholic teachings on contraception; second, how many Catholic women would accept or reject the teachings on contraception when those teachings were presented accurately; third, the reasons why many Catholic women reject Church teaching on these issues; and fourth, whether women who reject the Church’s teachings might be receptive to learning more about those teachings and, if so, what kind of information they might welcome.

It’s important to note that, for the most part, we chose not to focus on how many women “have ever used” contraceptives, as other studies have done. Statistics about past use tell us just that—what women have done in the past. They make no allowances for weakness, fear, confusion, and sin—conditions that beset us all—or for repentance and conversion of heart. Our focus on whether women choose to accept the Church’s teaching when it is presented accurately allows space for a woman’s conscience, faith, and good will to suggest the right path now and in the future, in spite of the past.

Our analysis describes significant differences in women's attitudes towards the Church's teachings depending on age range (18-34 and 35-54) and frequency of Church attendance (ranging from at least weekly to a few times a year). We offer some insights on who is most likely to support the teachings and why many women reject the Church's teachings on contraception. We explore ways, suggested by the data, that the Church's teachings might be presented more effectively, particularly to engage women who currently reject the Church's teaching but indicate some openness towards re-thinking those positions.

While our survey data sketches the contours of what Catholic women think about these issues, the focus groups (completed) and our in-depth interviews

(ongoing) provide deeper insights and rich nuance on women's questions, beliefs, motivations, and concerns surrounding these issues. Because the in-depth interviews are ongoing—and will not be completed until late 2012—this report is a preliminary report and does not include insights that may develop from those interviews. Final conclusions and recommendations may change.

Given the public debate around the Church's teaching on contraception, however, the timing seems right to release relevant survey data in the form of this preliminary report. We hope that this work will support efforts within the Church to better communicate and defend the Church's teaching—even though some of what we report here is surely not good news for the Church.

Findings

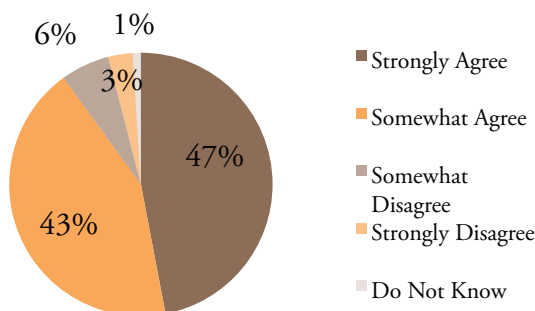
Note: Throughout this discussion, the term “Catholic women” refers to the population surveyed: church-going Catholic women, including those who attend church “frequently” (at least weekly) or “infrequently” (a few times a month to a few times a year). The term “Church” refers to the institutional Church and her related ministries.

Personal Experience Of Faith

Faith matters to church-going Catholic women. Among all women surveyed, 90% agree that their Catholic faith is “an important part” of their daily lives.

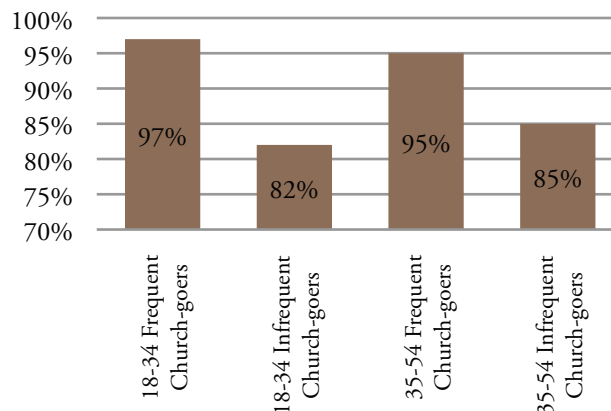
- Ninety percent of church-going Catholic women agree that the “Catholic faith is an important part of my daily life.” Nearly half (47%) agree strongly and just 9% disagree, including 3% who strongly disagree.

To begin, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: My Catholic faith is an important part of my daily life. Among Total Sample



- Women who worship weekly are overwhelmingly likely to agree that faith is an important part of daily life:
 - 97% of frequent worshippers ages 18-34 agree
 - 95% of frequent worshippers ages 35-54 agree
 - 85% of infrequent worshippers ages 35-54 agree
 - 82% of infrequent worshippers ages 18-34 agree

To begin, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: My Catholic faith is an important part of my daily life.



Totals reflect percent that strongly or somewhat “agree”

Participation In The Life Of The Church

Just over half (53%) of church-going Catholic women have been involved in the life of the Church community, in ways other than attending Mass, during the twelve months leading up to the survey. Service activities, such as helping in soup kitchens or participating in food drives, are most popular, engaging 21% of all women. Spiritual activities, including adoration, prayer meetings and the like, attract the next largest group, generating interest from 16% of all women.

Frequent church-goers are the most likely to be involved in almost every kind of activity.

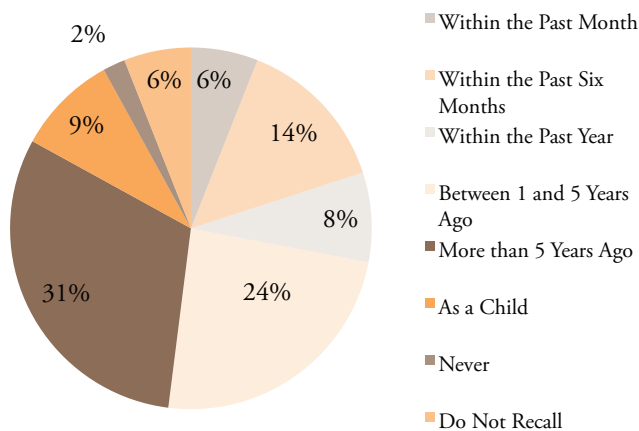
- For example, 33% of older (35-54) frequent church attendees and 26% of younger (18-34) frequent attendees are involved in service activities, compared to 21% of the overall sample.
- Thirty-one percent of older (35-54) frequent church attendees and 23% of younger (18-34) frequent attendees are involved in spiritual activities, compared to 16% of the overall sample.

The Sacrament Of Reconciliation: Frequency Related To Mass Attendance

While the vast majority of church-going Catholic women agree that their faith is important to them, few participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation very often. Only six percent overall have received the Sacrament within the past month, and just 28% (cumulative) have received it at some point within the past year. Roughly two-thirds (64%) have not received the Sacrament of Reconciliation

in over a year, including 31% for whom it has been more than five years since their last Confession.

When was the last time you received the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession)?
Among Total Sample



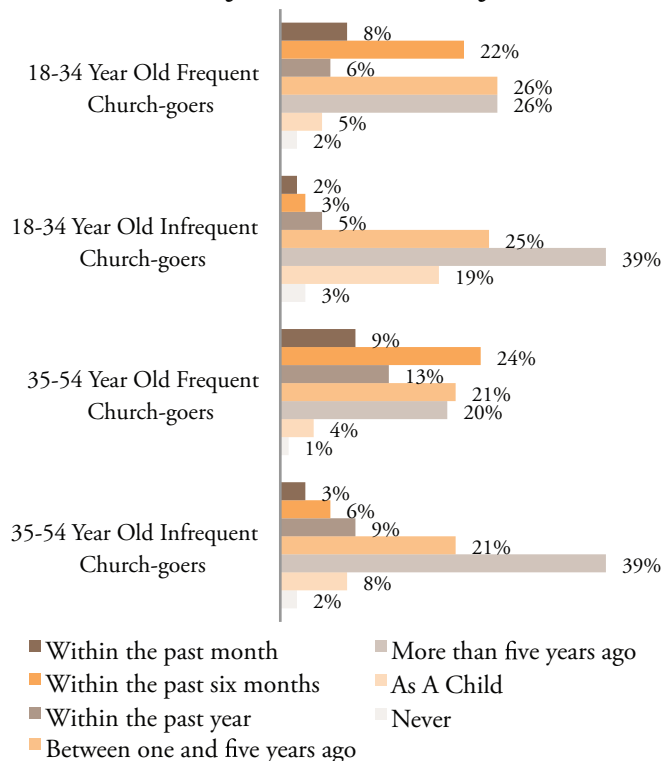
However, the extent to which church-going women seek forgiveness of sins through the Sacrament of Reconciliation varies widely—with frequency of Mass attendance as a strong indicator of more frequent Confession.

- Frequent church-goers, ages 35-54, receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation most often, with nearly half (46%) receiving the Sacrament within the past year.
 - By comparison, just 18% of infrequent church-goers (35-54) have gone to Confession within the past year.
- However, 45% of frequent church-goers, ages 35-54, have not sought Reconciliation in over a year, including 20% who say that it has been more than five years since their last Confession and an additional 4% who have not gone since childhood. (One percent have never received the Sacrament.)
 - Sixty-eight percent of older (35-54) infrequent church-goers have not been to Confession in over a year, including 39% who have stayed away from Confession for more than five years and 8% who have not gone since childhood. (Two percent have never received the Sacrament.)
- Frequent church-goers ages 18-34 also show higher rates of participation in this Sacrament, as just over one-third (36%) have gone to Confession in the past year.
 - By comparison, only 10% of infrequent church-goers, ages 18-34, have received the Sacrament

in the past year—the lowest percentage among all subgroups.

- Fifty-seven percent of frequent Mass attendees, ages 18-34, have not received the Sacrament in over a year, including 26% who have not sought Reconciliation for more than five years and 5% who have not gone since childhood. (Two percent have never received the Sacrament.)
- Eighty-three percent of young (18-34), infrequent church-goers have not been to Confession in over a year, including 39% for whom it has been over five years and 19% who have not gone back to Confession since childhood. (Three percent have never received the Sacrament.)

When was the last time you received the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession)?



Note: “Do not recall” responses are omitted from this chart, so totals may be less than 100%.

The Homily: Women’s Primary Source For Learning About Catholicism

When Catholic women are asked to select their primary sources for learning about the teachings of the Catholic Church, the Sunday homily wins hands down. A striking 72% of all women name the homily as their main source

to learn about Catholicism. Family members (58%), priests or religious (55%), and their own memory of childhood lessons (54%) are virtually tied for the next most popular sources of Church teachings. Four out of ten women named The Catechism of the Catholic Church as a primary source as well.

WOMEN'S PRIMARY SOURCES FOR LEARNING ABOUT CHURCH TEACHING (TOTAL SAMPLE)

72%	HOMILY IN MASS
58%	FAMILY
55%	PRIESTS OR OTHER RELIGIOUS LEADERS
54%	MEMORY OF CHILDHOOD LESSONS
40%	THE CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH
36%	TEACHINGS FROM CATHOLIC SCHOOL
32%	FRIENDS
28%	CHURCH ACTIVITIES, NOT INCLUDING MASS
26%	CATHOLIC NEWS MEDIA
18%	CLASSES ABOUT CATHOLICISM
15%	NON-FICTION: BOOKS, MOVIES, OR DVDS
10%	ENCYCLICALS OR VATICAN DOCUMENTS
9%	U.S. BISHOPS' (USCCB) WEBSITE OR RESOURCES
7%	NON-CATHOLIC OR SECULAR NEWS MEDIA
7%	CATHOLIC BLOGS
5%	FICTION: POPULAR BOOKS, MOVIES, OR DVDS
4%	CATHOLIC CELEBRITIES, POLITICIANS, OR PUBLIC FIGURES
1%	NON-CATHOLIC OR SECULAR BLOGS
2%	OTHER (SPECIFIED)
1%	BIBLE
	• CHURCH BULLETIN/NEWSLETTER
	• MISCELLANEOUS
4%	NONE OF THESE

Note: Multiple responses allowed so totals exceed 100%

Frequent church-goers are more likely than women overall to rely on Mass homilies to learn about the faith.

- Eighty-one percent of young (18-34), frequent church-goers cite the Mass homily as a top source, compared to 72% of women overall.

- Eighty percent of older (35-54), frequent church-goers cite the Mass homily as a top source, compared to 72% of women overall.

Younger women (18-34) who attend Mass weekly are more likely than women overall to rely on family to learn about the faith.

- Sixty-nine percent of frequent Mass attendees, ages 18-34, rely on family as a primary source compared to 58% of the total sample.

Frequent church-goers, both older (35-54) and younger (18-34), rely on priests or religious leaders in greater numbers than the overall sample.

- Seventy percent of frequent church-goers, ages 35-54, and 67% of frequent church-goers, ages 18-34, rely on priests or religious leaders, compared to 55% of the total sample.

Weak Conscience Formation: "Good Catholics" All

More than eight in ten Catholic women believe they can be "good Catholics" even if they "do not accept some of the Catholic Church's teachings on sex, family planning, birth control, and reproduction."

- Eighty-five percent of all women agree, 52% strongly, that dissent from Church teachings on sex, contraception, and reproduction is not incompatible with being a good Catholic.
 - Only 13% disagree, including just 6% who disagree strongly.
- Seventy-six percent of those who attend church at least once a week say they can be "good Catholics" without fully accepting the Church's teachings on sex, contraception, and reproduction.
 - By comparison, 93% of infrequent worshippers agree that being a "good Catholic" does not require them to accept the Church's teachings on sex, contraception, and reproduction.
- Among women who believe the "good Catholic" label does require agreement with Church teachings on sex and reproduction, 57% have been to Confession in the last year. In contrast, only 23% of those who perceive no conflict between being a "good Catholic" and dissenting from the Church's moral teachings have been to Confession in the last year.

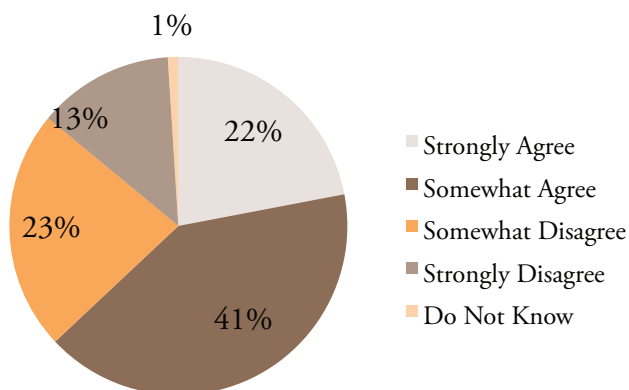
- Over one-third (35%) of women who wear the “good Catholic” label and dissent from Church teaching on these issues have not been to Confession in over five years.

Women Say Church Teaching Influences Beliefs About Right And Wrong

Catholic women readily agree that Church teachings influence their views of right and wrong in the areas of sexual morality and reproduction.

- Sixty-three percent of women overall agree, 22% strongly, that “[t]he teachings of the Catholic Church influence my beliefs about what is right or wrong when it comes to sex, family planning, birth control, and reproduction.”
 - Thirty-six percent of all Catholic women disagree, 13% strongly, that the Church influences their beliefs about right and wrong in the areas of sex and reproduction.

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: The teachings of the Catholic Church influence my beliefs about what is right or wrong when it comes to sex, family planning, birth control and reproduction.
Among Total Sample



- Frequency of Mass attendance matters: Nearly eight in ten (79%) of frequent church-goers, versus just under half (47%) of infrequent church-goers, say the Church influences their views on these issues.
 - Even so, 20% of women who attend Mass weekly say the teachings of the Church do not influence their views on right and wrong on these topics.

Catholic Women Welcome Children

Church-going Catholic women appreciate the gift of children: when asked to name the “ideal number of children to have,” regardless of “how many children you may already have,” Catholic women would have an average of 3.5 children—a number that did not differ significantly based on age, frequency of church attendance, education, or income.

- By comparison, a [2011 Gallup survey](#) found that 57% of Americans consider zero to two children the “ideal,” with greater percentages of high-income families favoring small families. According to Gallup, sixty-seven percent of high-income families—making over \$75,000—considered zero to two children ideal, while 56% of families making less than \$75,000 favored zero to two children.

IDEAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN (TOTAL SAMPLE)

7%	ZERO
5%	ONE
38%	TWO
23%	THREE
13%	FOUR
2%	FIVE
1%	SIX
*	SEVEN
-	EIGHT
-	NINE
*	TEN
-	ELEVEN
*	TWELVE
3%	NO LIMIT
7%	NOT SURE

Financial stress influences women’s views of the ideal number of children: When asked to name the “ideal number of children to have,” if “money were not a factor,” the ideal family size bumped up to 4.0.

- Young women (18-34) who attend church weekly would welcome an average of 4.3 children if money were not a factor.

- Catholic women see the value of siblings: Only 5% consider it ideal to have just one child, a number that dips to 3% when money is not a factor.
 - Women with at least one child at home preferred a mean of 3.8 children compared to women with no children at home (3.3 children).
- Fifty-five percent of the women surveyed have given birth; 90% of these women have had one to three children. Nineteen percent have suffered a miscarriage or stillbirth.
- Ten percent of church-going Catholic women overall report having had an abortion.
- While 8 percent of Catholic women overall say that they have used emergency contraception, those numbers spike among younger women.
 - Seventeen percent of women 18-34 have used emergency contraception, compared to just 2% of women 35-54.
 - Seventeen of those who have had an abortion have also used emergency contraception.
 - Among women who report that they have had an abortion, 37% say they currently attend Mass weekly.
 - Among women who report that they have used emergency contraception, 40% say they currently attend Mass weekly.

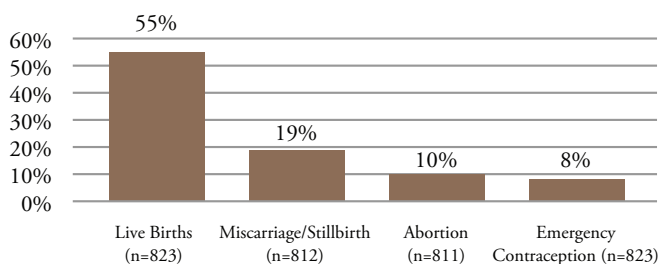
IDEAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN IF MONEY WERE NOT A FACTOR (TOTAL SAMPLE)

7%	ZERO
3%	ONE
26%	TWO
20%	THREE
19%	FOUR
6%	FIVE
5%	SIX
*	SEVEN
1%	EIGHT
*	NINE
*	TEN
-	ELEVEN
*	TWELVE
5%	NO LIMIT
7%	NOT SURE

Cause For Concern: Use Of Emergency Contraception By Young Women

Catholic women in this survey were asked to report the number of live births, miscarriages or stillbirths, and abortions they have experienced, as well as whether they had used emergency contraception. (Responses were not forced meaning that women could opt not to respond and still continue on with the survey, but nearly all survey participants chose to answer these questions.)

**% Ever Experienced or Used
Among Total Sample**



Conception: Money Matters Most In Deciding “When”

When asked to select the three “most important factors a couple needs to consider in deciding whether or not to try and conceive a baby,” Catholic women name financial ability to support a child (67%), relationship stability (56%), and marital status (41%). Consideration of “God’s plan” or “God’s will” carries little weight with most women and was selected by only 20% overall.

- Twenty-eight percent of weekly Mass-goers say God’s plan is among the most important factors to consider.
 - Only 9% of infrequent church-goers, ages 18-34, and 14% of infrequent church-goers, ages 35-54, say God’s plan is an important consideration.

TOP THREE FACTORS TO CONSIDER IN DECISION TO CONCEIVE A CHILD (TOTAL SAMPLE)

64%	ABILITY TO FINANCIALLY SUPPORT A CHILD
56%	RELATIONSHIP STABILITY
41%	MARITAL STATUS (WHETHER THEY ARE MARRIED OR NOT)
37%	WHETHER THEY FEEL READY TO HAVE A CHILD
25%	EMOTIONAL HEALTH
23%	PHYSICAL HEALTH
21%	PARTNER'S WILLINGNESS TO HAVE A CHILD
20%	GOD'S PLAN (WHETHER IT SEEMS TO BE GOD'S WILL)
2%	IMPACT ON MATERIAL LIFESTYLE (SPENDING ON CARS, VACATIONS, COMPUTERS, CLOTHES, ETC.)
2%	HOME OWNERSHIP/ SIZE OF HOME
1%	OPINIONS OF EXTENDED FAMILY OR FRIENDS
1%	NONE OF THE ABOVE

Note: Multiple responses (3) allowed so totals exceed 100%

Frequent church-goers are more likely to attach importance to marital status while infrequent church-goers emphasize relationship stability.

- Forty-seven percent of frequent church-goers 18-34 and 54% of frequent church-goers 35-54 select marital status as an important consideration.
- Sixty-three percent of young (18-34) infrequent church-goers and 68% of older (35-54) infrequent church-goers say relationship stability is a top factor.

Younger (18-34) infrequent church-goers are also more likely to cite ability to financially support a child (76%, compared to 64% in the overall sample) and “readiness” to have a child (43%, compared to 37% of women overall).

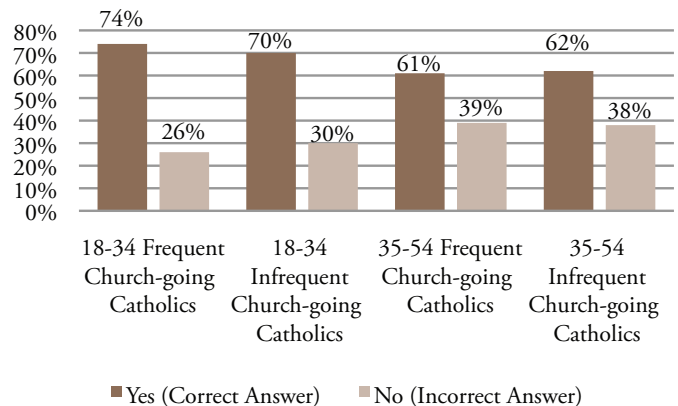
Contraception:

One-Third Of Women In The Pew Do Not Know Church Teaching.

We asked church-going Catholic women five questions designed to assess whether they had an accurate knowledge of the Church’s teaching on contraception.

- Eighty-five percent of women recognized, correctly, that the Church does not say that “all couples should try to have large families” and that the Church does teach that “it is morally acceptable for couples to space pregnancies or to prevent conception by abstaining from sex during a woman’s fertile times.”
- One-third of women, however, mistakenly believe that the Church does not teach that, “It is wrong for couples to use contraception (“birth control”) as a means to prevent conception or to space pregnancies.”
 - Half of the women who answered this question incorrectly (in other words, who erroneously think the Church says it is permissible to use contraception to prevent conception) attend Mass at least once a week.
 - Fifty-four percent of women with a high school education or less answered this question incorrectly (i.e., they believe the Church does NOT teach that contraception is wrong.)
 - Age has more bearing than frequency of Mass attendance when it comes to answering this question correctly, with younger women more likely to have an accurate understanding of Church teaching. (See chart below)

"The Catholic Church teaches...it is wrong for couples to use contraception ('birth control') as a means to prevent conception or to space pregnancies."



- One-third of women also mistakenly believe that that Church does teach that, “Couples have the right to decide for themselves what methods of family planning or contraception are morally acceptable, regardless of what the Church teaches.”

- Among those who incorrectly believe the Church says that couples may decide the morality of contraception regardless of Church teaching, nearly half (46%) attend Mass weekly.
- Sixty-three percent of women with a high school education or less answered this question incorrectly.
- A slightly smaller percentage (26%) believes, in error, that the Church does not teach that, “Couples must follow the teaching of the Catholic Church about which methods of family planning are morally acceptable.”

Attitudes Towards Teaching On Contraception: Negativity And Nuance

Few Completely Accept Teaching But Some Open To Learning More

We presented Catholic women with a “statement of Catholic teaching about contraception and family planning” (listed below) and then asked them if they accepted the teaching completely, in part, or not at all. Our findings do not support the common perception that Catholic women express near-universal, monolithic opposition to the Church’s teachings on contraception. While the majority of church-going Catholic women do not completely accept the Church’s teaching on contraception, their reactions to those teachings are far more nuanced and receptive than typically portrayed. Catholic women fall into three categories: “the faithful,” “the dissenters,” and the “soft middle.”

Statement: “The Catholic Church teaches that sex is designed by God to unite the couple in the most intimate expression of self-giving love and to create the possibility of new life (children). It is wrong to intentionally separate the life-giving and love-giving purposes of sex by using contraception, birth control, or voluntary sterilization specifically to prevent conception. Each couple may decide in good conscience when and how many children to have, but can never use an immoral method (contraception, birth control, or sterilization) to avoid pregnancy or space their children. Couples who wish to avoid or postpone pregnancy may observe the signs of a woman’s fertility and abstain from sex during those fertile times (“Natural Family Planning”).

The Faithful: Acceptance strongest among women who frequent the Sacraments

Catholic women who completely “accept” the Church’s teaching on contraception and family planning (the “faithful”) represent a small percentage (13%) of church-

going women overall. However, women who regularly receive the Sacraments are significantly more likely than women overall to accept the Church’s teaching completely. And, perhaps surprisingly—given the strong cultural messages that women “need” contraception—27% of young, weekly church-goers fully accept the Church’s teaching against contraception.

- Thirty-seven percent of women who attend Mass weekly and who have been to confession in the past year fully accept Church teachings on contraception.
- Thirty-one percent of women who went to Confession in the past year accept the Church’s teaching on contraception and family planning.
- Twenty-seven percent of young (18-34) frequent church-goers completely accept the Church’s teaching on contraception.
- Twenty-four percent of self-described conservatives completely accept the Church’s teaching on contraception.

Surprising Non-factors: Church “influence,” homilies, and Catholic schooling

Few women who describe themselves as influenced by relevant Church teachings, who glean Catholic teaching from homilies, or who attended Catholic schools completely accept Church teaching on contraception and family planning.

- Women hear the Church’s “advice,” but decide for themselves: Only 21% of women who say Church teachings “influence” their beliefs about what’s right or wrong in terms of sex, contraception, and reproduction completely accept the Church’s teaching.
- Homilies don’t do the job: Whether by neglect or design, Catholic homilies have failed to communicate persuasively the Church’s teachings on contraception and conscience formation.
 - Among women who say the homily in Mass is a primary source for learning about Catholic teachings, only 15% fully accept the Church’s teachings on contraception and family planning.
- Catholic schooling doesn’t make much difference either: Just 15% of women with five years of Catholic schooling fully accept the Church’s teachings on contraception.
 - By comparison, 11% of women who never attended Catholic schools fully accept Church teaching on contraception—a statistically similar result.

The Dissenters: A strong minority overall but a majority among infrequent Mass-goers

Catholic women who unequivocally reject the Church's teaching on contraception and family planning ("dissenters") and profess no interest in learning more about those teachings represent a strong minority of church-going women. Not surprisingly, women who attend church less frequently are more likely than frequent church-goers to reject the Church's teaching out of hand. However, nearly one in four (24%) women who attend Mass weekly express firm opposition to the Church's teachings.

- Thirty-seven percent of women overall say that they "do not accept" the Church's teaching on contraception and family planning.
- Dissenters predominate among infrequent church-goers, but not among women who frequent the Sacraments.
 - Fifty-two percent of infrequent church-goers completely reject the Church's teaching on contraception.
 - Twenty-four percent of weekly Mass-goers completely reject Church teaching on family planning and, when asked, say they are not interested in learning more.
 - Twelve percent of women who attend Mass weekly and who have been to confession in the past year completely reject Church teachings on contraception.
- Fifty-one percent of self-described liberals completely reject Church teachings on contraception.

The Soft Middle: Open to Learning More

A plurality of Catholic women overall (44%) accepts "parts of this teaching but not all." They represent a "soft middle," unwilling to completely reject Church teaching, but unable to fully accept it either. [Note: Six percent of women overall said they are "not sure/don't know" if they accept or reject the Church's teaching on family planning and contraception.]

- Forty-six percent of women who attend Mass weekly and who have been to confession in the past year accept Church teachings on contraception in part but not completely.

Receptivity. Frequent church-goers, while not fully on board with the Church's teachings, tend to be

receptive towards new information and perspectives that support Church teaching.

- Among weekly Mass-goers who accept parts but not all of Church teaching on family planning, 53% show interest in at least one specific way to learn more about Church teaching. (*Note: specific options are discussed in later paragraphs.*)
- By comparison, among all church-going women who accept some but not all Church teaching on contraception, 39% indicate interest in at least one specific option for learning more about Church teaching.

Problem-solvers, not rebels. Just 18% of women who accept parts but not all of the Church's teaching on contraception say their lack of full acceptance is because they do not accept the Church's moral authority on contraception.

- In contrast, 53% of dissenters (women who completely reject Church teaching) reject Church teaching because they do not accept the Church's moral authority on contraception.

Reasons Why: Moral Autonomy, Sexual Pleasure, and NFP's 'Ineffectiveness'

Women who said they accept parts but not all of the Church's teachings on contraception or that they do not accept the Church's teaching on contraception were asked, "Why, specifically, do you not accept the Catholic teaching on contraception and family planning?"

Moral Autonomy. Fifty-five percent of women overall reject the Church's teaching on contraception (at least in part) because they believe that the couple has "the moral right" to decide which family planning method to use.

- Seventy-eight percent of dissenters (women who completely reject Church teaching) cite moral autonomy as their reason.
- The "moral right" to decide for themselves was the top reason selected by all subgroups—infrequent and frequent church-goers, older (35-54) and younger (18-34) women and married and unmarried women—indicating broad confusion about the relationship between authoritative Catholic teaching, conscience formation, and moral autonomy.

- Interestingly, twenty-eight percent overall locate their rejection of the specific Catholic teaching on contraception within the larger context of their rejection of the Church's general moral authority on the issue.
 - Fifty-three percent of dissenters say they reject the Church's specific teaching on contraception because they reject the Church's general moral authority on the issue.
 - In contrast, just 18% of women in the soft middle reject this specific teaching because they reject the Church's overall moral authority.

Pleasure, yes. Babies, no. Forty-six percent of women reject the Church's teaching on contraception, at least in part, because they claim the "right to enjoy sexual pleasure" without fear of pregnancy.

- Sixty-nine percent of dissenters (totally reject Church teaching) select this reason.

Perception: NFP doesn't work. Forty-one percent of women overall say they reject the Church's teaching because they believe natural family planning "is not effective."

- Sixty percent of women who completely reject Church teachings say NFP is not effective.
 - In addition, 19% of women overall reject Catholic teachings on family planning because they view NFP as "impractical or too difficult to use."

Q: "WHY, SPECIFICALLY, DO YOU NOT ACCEPT THE CATHOLIC TEACHING ON CONTRACEPTION AND FAMILY PLANNING? PLEASE SELECT ALL THAT APPLY."

- 53% EACH COUPLE HAS THE MORAL RIGHT TO DECIDE WHICH METHODS OF FAMILY PLANNING TO USE.
- 46% COUPLES HAVE THE RIGHT TO ENJOY SEXUAL PLEASURE WITHOUT WORRYING ABOUT PREGNANCY.
- 41% NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING IS NOT AN EFFECTIVE WAY TO PREVENT PREGNANCY OR TO SPACE CHILDREN.
- 28% CONTRACEPTION IS THE ONLY EFFECTIVE WAY THAT A COUPLE CAN CONTROL HOW MANY CHILDREN TO HAVE AND WHEN TO HAVE THEM.

- 28% I DO NOT ACCEPT THE CHURCH'S MORAL AUTHORITY ON THE ISSUE OF CONTRACEPTION AND FAMILY PLANNING.
- 23% FAMILY PLANNING AND CONTRACEPTIVE USE ARE NOT MORAL ISSUES.
- 19% NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING IS IMPRACTICAL OR TOO DIFFICULT TO USE.
- 15% THE CATHOLIC CHURCH HAS LOST MORAL CREDIBILITY TO TEACH ON MATTERS OF SEX AND REPRODUCTION BECAUSE OF THE SEXUAL ABUSE SCANDALS IN THE CHURCH.
- 15% I DO NOT THINK I CAN HANDLE A LARGE FAMILY.
- 1% I DO NOT UNDERSTAND IT.
- 3% OTHER (SPECIFIED)
 - 1% EXTENUATING CIRCUMSTANCES
 - I DO NOT THINK CONTRACEPTION IS MORALLY WRONG
 - I DO ACCEPT THE CATHOLIC TEACHING ON CONTRACEPTION
 - 1% MISCELLANEOUS

Note: Multiple responses allowed so totals exceed 100%. Question answered only by women who reject, in whole or in part, Church teaching on family planning. It was not answered by women who said they accept the teaching (13%) or are unsure if they accept the teaching (6%).

Receptivity. Openness to learning more about Catholic teaching on contraception.

We asked Catholic women to indicate interest in "some ways to learn more about Catholic teachings on contraception, family planning, and Natural Family Planning (NFP)" or to indicate that they are "not interested in learning more about Catholic teaching on family planning and contraception."

- Fifty-six percent of women overall say they are not interested in learning more about Church teaching on contraception while 44% of women overall show interest in one or more ways to learn more.

- Younger women (18-34) are split evenly: 50% indicate interest in one or more options presented, while 50% say they are not interested in learning more.
 - Older women (62% of 35-54 year olds) express least interest in learning more, perhaps because age or life stage makes the teaching less personally relevant.
- Fifty-three percent of weekly Mass-goers who accept parts but not all of Church teaching on contraception show interest in at least one specific way to learn more about Church teaching.
 - Thirty-nine percent of all women who accept parts but not all of Church teaching on contraception indicate interest in learning more about the Church's teaching.
- Sixty-seven percent of women who express interest in learning more about the Church's teachings on contraception are already involved in their parish.

What Women Want to Know

Women who are receptive to learning more about Catholic teaching on contraception show most interest in the health and relationship benefits of natural family planning (NFP) and in evidence of NFP's effectiveness.

- Twenty-three percent show interest in couples' testimonies about health and relationship benefits
- Twenty-three percent want to see studies that prove NFP's effectiveness.
- Twenty-two percent express interest in a doctor's recommendation of NFP and its effectiveness.
- Twenty-two percent indicate interest in couples' testimonies about NFP's effectiveness.

WAYS TO LEARN MORE ABOUT CATHOLIC TEACHINGS ON CONTRACEPTION AND NFP (TOTAL SAMPLE)

- 23% TESTIMONIES FROM COUPLES ABOUT THE HEALTH AND RELATIONSHIP BENEFITS OF NFP.
- 23% STUDIES THAT PROVE NFP IS 97% EFFECTIVE IN PREVENTING PREGNANCY.
- 22% A DOCTOR'S RECOMMENDATION OF NFP AND ITS EFFECTIVENESS.
- 22% TESTIMONIES FROM COUPLES ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF NFP.
- 20% INFORMATION ABOUT WHY NFP IS PRO-WOMAN (PROMOTES BETTER HEALTH AND SELF-IMAGE AND EQUALITY IN RELATIONSHIPS).
- 16% A HOMILY FROM MY PARISH PRIEST OR BISHOP EXPLAINING THE CATHOLIC TEACHINGS ON CONTRACEPTION AND FAMILY PLANNING.
- 14% A HOMILY FROM MY PARISH PRIEST OR BISHOP ENCOURAGING COUPLES TO USE NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING (NFP).
- 13% MEDICAL INFORMATION ABOUT FORMS OF BIRTH CONTROL THAT ARE ABORTIFACIENT (PREVENT A NEWLY CONCEIVED EMBRYO FROM IMPLANTING AND GROWING IN THE WOMB).
- 1% OTHER (SPECIFIED)
 - * UNSURE/DO NOT UNDERSTAND THE QUESTION
 - * MISCELLANEOUS
- 56% I AM NOT INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE ABOUT CATHOLIC TEACHING ON FAMILY PLANNING AND CONTRACEPTION (ALLOWED ONLY THIS RESPONSE).

Note: Totals exceed 100% because women were allowed to select multiple responses UNLESS they specified that they were "not interested in learning more."

Conclusion

Our data challenges the assumption that Catholic women square off in near-universal, unyielding opposition to the Church's teaching on contraception. In fact, the views of Catholic women show considerably more nuance, reflecting ambivalence as well as fidelity or dissent on this issue. In addition, many women who currently disagree with the Church's position show some receptiveness to learning more about what the Church teaches, suggesting a degree of openness that has been overlooked or underestimated until now. However, the data underscores the steep, long-term challenge the Church faces in communicating a correct view of conscience and the Church's role in forming conscience, particularly in matters of human sexuality.

The survey results sound two positive notes for the Church:

First, a significant number of younger Catholics (18-34) who frequent the Sacraments demonstrate an encouraging degree of knowledge of and receptivity towards the Church's teaching on contraception. They represent a small but solid core of women with the potential to communicate the practical and spiritual benefits of aligning one's sexual behavior with the teachings of the Church. The Church must consider how to encourage these women in their faithfulness and enlist them as ambassadors of the "good news" of the Church's teachings on sexuality, including the stance on contraception.

Second, while only a small percentage (13%) of Catholic women overall fully embrace the Church's teaching on family planning, a plurality of women (44%) express partial acceptance of the teaching. And 53% of weekly Mass-goers who only partially accept the Church's teaching indicate interest in learning more about it. The sincere faith and previously overlooked receptivity of this "soft middle"—in the face of decades of dissent, inadequate homiletics, and the sexualized culture—argue for a strategic effort to re-open a conversation about contraception. Neither hardened rebels nor unquestioningly obedient, many in the "soft middle" look more like practical problem-solvers who need to hear reasons why the Church's teaching makes sense on a practical level. They want to know the benefits—physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual—that come from regulating their fertility in the manner proposed by the Church.

With better messaging about the practical benefits of NFP, the Church may interest these women in using a morally licit means of family planning (NFP). And indeed these women will accrue real benefits—including growth in generosity and self-control—even as the Church engages them in the longer-term task of conscience formation, which would address right motives and just reasons for using natural family planning.

Conscience formation, our data suggests, is the real problem underlying the Church's 'contraception problem.' And it is cause for deep concern.

Church-going Catholic women want to do what's right. The women we surveyed reflect a sincere commitment to faith in their daily lives. But they belong to a generation steeped in moral relativism—a generation, Princeton Professor Robert P. George [writes](#), which generally equates 'conscience' with their own "[moral permission slip](#)," and which judges right and wrong by depth of feeling rather than consonance with objective truth.

Moreover, at least on the local level, Catholic women have not benefited from the Church's clear teaching on sexual morality. Homilies either have failed to address contraception and conscience formation or have failed to do so persuasively (only 15% of women who rely on homilies as their primary source for Church teaching fully accept the Church's teaching on contraception).

In their reluctance to preach the truth about sex and contraception, many Catholic clergy and lay leaders have ceded the conscience formation of Catholic women to dissenting theologians, contraceptive-promoting medical professionals, and the sexualized popular culture—with disastrous impact.

The poorly-formed consciences of Catholic women find reinforcement at every turn.

Social scientists tell us that individuals can be influenced to do 'the right thing' by "[choice architecture](#)," an environment that encourages them to make beneficial choices. Factors such as default options, feedback loops, incentives, and disincentives "[nudge](#)" people to make better choices—choices that align with the person's deeper goals and beliefs.

For decades now, Catholic women have made decisions about family planning and contraception from within a faulty choice architecture promoted by the culture and

reproductive rights advocates. The sexually permissive culture, for example, mocks the teachings of the Church, mistakenly equates modern natural family planning with old-time, ineffective methods, and signals social disapproval of families who have more than two, “planned” children. Abortion advocates, asserting a woman’s right to decide reproductive issues unfettered by law or morality, distort the meanings of “freedom,” “choice,” and “conscience.” The medical community—including many Catholic medical professionals—in effect sways the decisions of Catholic women by promoting contraceptives as the automatic, default option for preventing pregnancy.

Even more problematic, however, is the way some leaders within the Church have reinforced this faulty choice architecture instead of challenging it. It is common knowledge that untold numbers of Catholic priests, religious, teachers, professors, theologians, pre-Cana mentors, writers, and ministry leaders openly deride the Church’s teaching on contraception. Others, perhaps well-intentioned, present Church teachings inaccurately, fail to correct faulty conscience formation, or dismiss natural family planning as unworkable. In so doing, these Catholic voices deprive Catholic women of meaningful choice. They rob women of the knowledge and spiritual guidance women need to make informed family planning decisions that align with the Catholic faith, respect God’s design for marital sexuality, embrace responsible parenthood, and avoid negative health, marital, and emotional consequences.

Similarly, Catholic parents, friends, and relatives who fall silent when their loved ones reject the Church’s teaching on contraception effectively reinforce that choice by their silence. Their failure to provide meaningful feedback—to speak the truth, albeit gently and without condemnation—deprives women of information and insight that might help them form their consciences in light of objective truth and point them towards morally correct decisions.

In the final analysis, the survey highlights a steep challenge ahead: the Church must re-assert the integral role of Church teaching in the formation of conscience and, in the process, proclaim a consistent sexual ethic to an audience formed more by popular culture than by the teachings of the Catholic Church.

Nudge: Presenting the Church’s Teaching, Unapologetically

The Church’s teaching against contraception is clear. More than that, however, the Church’s beautiful teaching on sexuality, married love, and responsible parenthood shows Catholic women a spiritually and personally rewarding path for themselves and their families. This teaching needs to be presented frequently, positively, and without apology, from the pulpit and through Church ministries. But it also needs to be presented persuasively—something the Church has struggled to do effectively—and through new communications strategies including new media, social communications, peer ministries, and other new approaches.

Next Steps: Research to Support Persuasive Communication

We suggest that this survey, or a similar instrument, be administered in Spanish and English to a sample of Hispanic women. The present survey, administered in English, did not include a large enough sample of representative Hispanic women to measure reliably this population’s views and understanding of Church teaching on sexuality and reproduction. Ideally, a survey of Hispanic women would assess their beliefs about faith, conscience, and contraception as well as the impact of acculturation on those beliefs. This information is vital not only because the face of the Church is increasingly Hispanic but also because, in some urban areas, Hispanic youth have been targeted for aggressive sexual education efforts that undermine Catholic beliefs and values. The Church needs to empower Hispanic women—especially mothers, aunts, and grandmothers—with the truth of the Church’s teaching, presented clearly and persuasively, not only for their own sakes but also for the sake of the next generation. Understanding *what Hispanic Catholic women think* will be the first step towards that important effort.

Another helpful follow-up might include a survey of Catholic clergy, asking them what tools, resources, and support they believe would help them preach and minister more effectively in support of the Church’s teaching on sexuality, contraception, and reproduction. It also would be helpful to know how they currently express the Church’s teaching on conscience and contraception and how they express the benefits and drawbacks of contraception and natural family planning. Finally, it would be helpful to

collect “best practices” —the language, messages, and approaches that clergy have found most persuasive in presenting the Church’s teaching on these topics to women, men, teens, and engaged or married couples.

Our data suggests an acute need for research that identifies the best language and messaging—and the best use of images, video presentations, and interactive websites—to communicate the Church’s teachings on sex and reproduction simply, clearly, and persuasively. In particular, language and message testing should aim to make the Church’s teaching more accessible to less-well-educated Catholics. Our research indicates that women with only a high school education show much poorer understanding of the Church’s teaching on contraception and family planning. Priests and ministry leaders need simple, less theological and more concrete language to explain the teachings of the Church, so that to all Catholics have meaningful access to the truth.

Although leadership from the pulpit on these issues is crucial, we hope that the Church will draw from the experience and leadership of Catholic women themselves. Well-formed Catholic women, especially Catholic medical professionals, can provide invaluable encouragement and persuasive personal witness to other Catholic women. We propose a few ideas below—conversation starters, really—on ways that the Church can better engage Catholic women in support of the Church’s teachings.

Towards a New Strategy

We hope this report prompts others to pursue related inquiries within their own areas of expertise. For example, the natural family planning community might conduct focus groups to better orient an outreach towards women who represent the “soft middle” on contraception—women whose objections and misperceptions about natural family planning need to be overcome from the outset because their initial motivation is practical rather than a specific desire to embrace the fullness of Church teaching.

Marjorie Campbell, a Catholic lawyer, canon lawyer, and the founder of [NewFeminism](#), sees promise in “how important faith is to Catholic women and the importance of homilies as a primary source of information on Catholic teachings.” These results “suggest an encouraging willingness, even hunger, to know more.” At the same time, she notes that factual and theological

misinformation, lack of familiarity with Catholic thought (e.g. Theology of the Body) and the “widespread confusion about how to reach moral judgments” point to a “grave need to drive accurate information from the pulpit.” Mrs. Campbell urges close collaboration between priests and well-formed Catholic women to develop more effective ways to address ‘difficult’ subjects during homilies and in ministry. She emphasizes that in light of women’s claims to moral autonomy in conscience formation, reinforced by the cultural mindset to make decisions by “what ‘feels’ morally acceptable,” effective outreaches should strive for a tone that is personal, factual, and non-judgmental.

Advisory Committee member [Lisa Hendey](#), founder of the popular website [CatholicMom](#), observes that while women have relied on homilies for information in the past, social communications offer a vital tool for reaching today’s Catholic women. She notes that, “Yes, we need more preaching on these issues in Mass and in homilies, but we faith-filled women also need to live out a greater conviction to sharing our witness with our families, neighbors, co-workers and fellow parishioners.” Social media allows women to share their struggles, decisions, and success stories as they strive to live a faithful Catholic life. The “[new media](#)” emphasis of [Bishop John Wester](#) at the June 2012 USCCB meeting suggests a welcome interest in the power of social media to support Catholic teaching on faith, conscience, and contraception.

In a similar vein, Dr. Jennifer Roback Morse (who leads the [Ruth Institute](#) and educates college students about traditional marriage) suggests that Church ministries might successfully train young women as peer counselors to present the Church’s teaching accurately and make a persuasive, benefits-oriented case for living in accord with it.

Erika Bachiochi, J.D., and the Editor of [Women, Sex, and the Church: A Case for Catholic Teaching](#), argues that the while the Catholic medical community must continue to improve the effectiveness and reliability of NFP (and educate the medical establishment about NFP benefits), clergy and lay leaders alike must sow seeds of trust in God and generosity towards children. These attitudes come into play not only in the initial decision to conceive a child but also in the difficult periods of child-rearing that inevitably follow. Hearts disposed to rely on God will grow in patience and trust even when faced with an unexpected pregnancy or other difficulties.

Lisa Brenninkmeyer, a convert to Catholicism and founder of the excellent Scripture study for Catholic women, [Walking with Purpose](#), sees a call to action in the survey results:

If we were to do an analysis of the decline of the influence of Christianity in Europe, something I experienced first hand while living there, it would be clear that the US is heading in the same direction... The key question is, how are we responding? Are we responding in a manner that is pushing this generation away instead of winning them to Christ? Are we better known for what we are against rather than what we are for?

I feel great hope when I read the writings and hear the speaking of Christopher West regarding the Theology of the Body. He... communicates the teachings of the Catholic Church on sexuality in a way that considers these teachings not the 'bad news that we are stuck with,' but rather the good news that can be our strongest tool in evangelization...

Finding a way to incorporate the Church's teachings on sexuality as the solution to the meaninglessness and hurt that comes from following our culture's guidance can be an excellent tool in the new evangelization...[I hope] this research will serve as a springboard for creative minds to find ways to winsomely communicate the life-giving truths of Catholic moral teaching.

All of us involved with this project join Mrs. Brenninkmeyer in praying that we would “never lose sight of the bigger picture, which is the number of baptized Catholics who haven’t yet experienced conversion of heart. May these findings lead us closer to the best ways to meet Catholics where they are, and lead them to where God wants them to be.”

And that, in the final analysis, is the purpose behind this report, *What Catholic Women Think About Faith, Conscience, and Contraception*.

Appendix

Demographics

Quota Groups		Marital Status	
Women 18-34, Frequent church-goers	24%	Single, never married	30%
Women 18-34, Infrequent church-goers	26%	Single, never married, living with partner	3%
Women 35-54, Frequent church-goers	25%	Engaged	2%
Women 35-54, Infrequent church-goers	25%	Married	53%
Age		Separated	1%
18-24	10%	Widowed	2%
25-29	15%	Divorced	8%
30-34	25%	Children under 18 in HH	
35-39	5%	Zero	63%
40-44	7%	One	17%
45-49	10%	Two	13%
50-54	28%	Three	5%
Church Attendance		Four	1%
More than once a week	5%	Five	1%
Once a week	44%	Six	*
A few times per month	16%	Education Level	
A few times per year	35%	High School or Less	8%
Race		Some College/Technical School	24%
White	89%	College Graduate	36%
African-American	1%	Post Graduate Work	31%
Hispanic	5%	Household Income	
Asian	3%	Less than \$25,000	11%
Other	2%	\$25,000-\$49,999	23%
Ideology		\$50,000-\$74,999	22%
Conservative	33%	\$75,000-\$99,999	14%
Moderate	31%	\$100,000+	16%
Liberal	29%	Prefer not to answer	14%
Party ID		Catholic School Attendance	
Republican	35%	Never	41%
Independent	14%	Less than 1 year	2%
Democrat	40%	1-2 years	6%
		3-5 years	9%
		6-10 years	21%
		11 years or more	21%