Religion Today
February 10 - 16, 2013

“American Catholicism in Global Context”
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Make no doubt about it, American Catholics like their leaders. In a 2012 Pew Forum poll, 82 percent said they were satisfied with the leadership of their local priest and 83 percent approved of the leadership of U.S. nuns. Additionally, 74 percent of Catholics approved of the pope, while 70 percent approved of the U.S. bishops.

But, despite overall approval of their leaders, American Catholics do not hold to the church teachings which these leaders propound. More than 90 percent of married Catholic women of child-bearing age use or have used birth control (and thus so have 90 percent of married Catholic men), even though church teachings forbid it. Similarly, 54 percent of Catholics approve of gay marriage, even as the pope and the bishops rail against it.

At the same time, the American Catholic Church is changing. While the overall membership of the church is increasing due to Hispanic immigration, the traditional “white, non-Hispanic” membership (as the pollsters call it) has been declining for years. Fully one in 10 adult Americans are former Catholics; 40 percent of those born and raised in the church no longer belong. The vast majority of these cite the church’s teachings on sex and gender, ranging from abortion and homosexuality to birth control to the church’s treatment of women, as the reason for their exit.

With Pope Benedict stepping down, the challenges of the American church facing any new pope are clear. There is a great deal of dissatisfaction among American Catholics over the church’s stands on women and sexuality. To revitalize the American Catholic Church, something needs to change.

Is that likely? Probably not.

American Catholics constitute only 7 percent of the global Catholic Church. Even if you add them to European Catholics, where the same gender and sexual issues are in contention, that totals less than one-third of the world’s Catholics. More than two-thirds of Catholics live in Latin America, Africa and Asia. And Catholic membership in Africa and Asia is growing rapidly.

While European and North American societies are pulling the church toward greater freedom in sexual matters, the societies in Africa, Asia and Latin America tug Catholicism in the opposite direction. The vast majority of nations in these regions consist of traditional societies, at least with regard to the roles of women and men. A few nations in South America, with Brazil being the most prominent, are trying to Westernize by relaxing restrictions in these areas, but they are noticeable as exceptions.

A far more important dynamic appears in Africa and Asia, where Christianity exists alongside Islam and, in some countries, is overshadowed by it. As we have become aware in recent years, Islam has strong traditions about the subordinate role of women in the public sphere. Many countries even have “morality police” who enforce traditions of modest clothing and veiling. Islam also is strongly anti-homosexual.

For their own protection and the safety of their members, all Christian churches in these countries have pursued conservative social agendas with a vengeance. Two African nations are in the process of enacting legislation punishing homosexual activity with the death penalty, with Nigeria and Uganda in the lead. They do not want Islamic vigilantes targeting Christians as morally lax.

The Anglican Church, also a global church with a strong presence in North America and Africa, has found that American advances in gender equality have so angered African Anglicans that the church seems likely to split. Whereas Americans have ordained both female and gay bishops, the African branches refuse to even consider women as ministers, let alone admit the existence of gay priests.

This same dynamic is playing out in the global Catholic Church as well. The pressures from the largest and fastest growing regions of Catholicism suggests that American Catholics will see little reform or liberalizing of the church’s teaching on sexuality and the place of women in the church.

As Benedict has said, perhaps a smaller, more unified church lies in Catholicism’s future. If the present dynamics play out as expected, this will certainly be the case for American Catholicism.