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Media Relations

New Report: Catholics More Supportive Of Gay And Lesbian Rights Than General Public, Other Christians

March 22, 2011

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Catholics are more supportive of gay and lesbian rights than the general public and other Christians, according to a new report released today. The new report, which is the most comprehensive portrait of Catholic attitudes on gay and lesbian issues assembled to date, also finds that 7-in-10 Catholics say that messages from America’s places of worship contribute a lot (33 percent) or a little (37 percent) to higher rates of suicide among gay and lesbian youth.

“The strong evidence of Catholic support for gay marriage highlights the growing acceptance in American culture of the normalcy of same-sex relationships, and further showcases ordinary Catholics’ dissent from official church teaching on sexual morality,” said Catholic scholar Michelle Dillon, a panelist on the call releasing the report and professor of sociology at University of New Hampshire.

“Most American Catholics believe that one can be a good Catholic and disagree with the Vatican and the bishops on issues of personal conscience; gay-marriage has clearly become another issue, along with artificial contraception and divorce and remarriage, which Catholics believe is not core to what it means to be Catholic,” Dillon said.

Among the key findings:

- Nearly three-quarters of Catholics favor either allowing gay and lesbian people to marry (43 percent) or allowing them to form civil unions (31 percent). Only 22 percent of Catholics say there should be no legal recognition of a gay couple’s relationship.
- Nearly three-quarters (73 percent) of Catholics favor laws that would protect gay and lesbian people against discrimination in the workplace; 63 percent of Catholics favor allowing gay and lesbian people to serve openly in the military; and 6-in-10 (60 percent) Catholics favor allowing gay and lesbian couples to adopt children.
- Less than 4-in-10 Catholics give their own church top marks (a grade of an A or a B) on its handling of the issue of homosexuality; majorities of members of most other religious groups give their churches high marks.
- A majority of Catholics (56 percent) believe that sexual relations between two adults of the same gender is not a sin.

“It may come as a surprise to many that rank and file Catholics are more supportive of rights for gays and lesbians than other Christians and the public,” said Robert Jones, CEO of Public Religion Research Institute. “But the best data available paints this consistent portrait across a range of issues, including same-sex marriage, workplace non-discrimination, open military service, and adoption rights for gay and lesbian couples.”

The report was released today in a national press teleconference that included Robert Jones, PRRI CEO; Daniel Cox, PRRI research director; Stephen Schneck, director of the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies at Catholic University of America; and Michelle Dillon, author of “Catholic Identity: Balancing Reason, Faith, and Power” (Cambridge University Press, 1999). The report draws on original analysis of existing data from PRRI and other sources, and includes previously unreleased data from PRRI’s monthly Religion and Politics Tracking Polls.

“These data demonstrate that the momentum for legal recognition for same-sex unions is strong among

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American Catholics and likely growing with generational change,” said Stephen Schneck, director of the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies at Catholic University of America. “Even among Latino Catholics, long supposed to be a group supportive of traditional social values, the numbers point to growing support for same-sex marriage. The question facing the American bishops, who oppose same-sex marriage on doctrinal grounds, is how it will choose to address this momentum.”

To read the full report or to listen to the teleconference, click here: <http://bit.ly/CatholicsGL>.

Public Religion Research Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research and education organization specializing in work at the intersection of religion, values and public life.

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