

Introducing the 2021 Survey of American Catholic Priests: Overview and Selected Findings

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Abstract

This manuscript introduces the 2021 Survey of American Catholic Priests (SACP), a data-gathering initiative which resulted in a new dataset containing responses to 54 survey questions from 1,036 Catholic priests in the United States. Replicating questions from a 2002 poll of Catholic priests from the Los Angeles Times allowed us to assess changes over time. Here, we present selected findings in eight areas: summary comparisons, morale, moral assessments, relationships to and evaluations of bishops, salvation exclusivism, perceptions of the conservatism or liberalism of younger priests, approval of Pope Francis, and the state of the Catholic Church in America. We find strong empirical confirmation of the nearly ubiquitous perception that younger priests are more orthodox in their beliefs than older priests. Additionally, we find a significant turn toward pessimism regarding the current state and trajectory of the Church. Other patterns and opportunities for further analyses are discussed.

This manuscript serves as an introduction to the 2021 Survey of American Catholic Priests (SACP), a data-gathering initiative which resulted in a new dataset containing responses to 54 survey questions from 1,036 Catholic priests in the United States. The SACP continues a rich, decades-long line of social scientific research into the clergy of the Catholic Church, and especially those in the U.S. (e.g., Greeley and Schoenherr 1972; Hoge and Wenger 2003; Greeley 2004; Rossetti 2011; Gautier et al. 2012; Sullins 2013). Here, we review prior survey research on Catholic priests in the U.S., describe the methods and scope of this new survey, present a selection of its basic findings, and conclude with a discussion of the (additional) sorts of topics and questions this new quantitative dataset can be used to illuminate.

The SACP's data on Catholic priests in the U.S. will prove helpful for advancing what is a thriving subfield focused on the social, cultural, and institutional aspects of present-day Catholicism (e.g., Bullivant 2019; Dillon 2018. Recent reviews include Bruce 2013; Conway 2021) and contribute to sociological knowledge of this global religious tradition. Toward that end, we have deposited these data at the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), thereby allowing other religion scholars and researchers access to these new data.

Background

Why Survey Catholic Priests?

Surveying priests offers a systematic look into the internal workings and character of the Catholic Church in a changing world. The latter half of the twentieth century inaugurated major

shifts in (and challenges for) the Church, and the particular cultural situation in the U.S. made the changes acute, with implications for priestly life and ministry (Hoge and Wenger 2003; Gautier et al. 2012). Higher education and upward mobility among American Catholics after World War II had subtle effects, including higher expectations for intensive pastoral care and better homilies. The global reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) updated language and liturgy among other things, and for many threw into question the proper role and identity of the priesthood. Starting in the late 1960s, a decline in the number of priests led to increased pressures and workloads.

Any changes internal to the Catholic Church during this era, moreover, occurred in the context of broader social and moral transitions of “the long 1960s” in America, including changing racial relations, the feminist/women’s movement, the sexual revolution, a new progressive generation of Americans, and tensions over war and peace (Strain 2017). In more recent times, emerging public knowledge of child sexual abuse and coverup scandalized the Church, upset many lay Catholics, and placed priests under an intensified new lens of suspicion (Blasi and Oviedo 2020). And, of course, history never stays in the past. Cultural and social trends which began in the 1960s have continued to the present day, leading to America’s deeper submersion now into cultural and religious pluralism, digital technology, identity politics, sexual and gender disorder, anti-natalism, and distrust of institutional religion.

These events and transformations have shifted the world in which Catholic clergy live and minister. Over decades of change and sometimes turmoil, both inside and outside the Church, the thoughts, behaviors, and condition of priests became the object of social scientific interest—and concern—for the lens such things provide on the world’s largest religious body in relation to a modernizing world (for a review, see Froehle 2011). Much existing social research on the Catholic Church has been undertaken by Catholic agencies and practitioners, as exemplified by the work of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University. But even beyond the interests of Catholic institutions, empirical inquiry into the Catholic Church has shed light on more general considerations of interest to social scientists, such as authority, institutional dynamics, religious formation and change, moral order, and more (Conway 2021).

The 2002 Los Angeles Times Poll

Among prior surveys, the *Los Angeles Times* conducted a survey of Catholic priests from September 1993 through January 1994, the most notable finding being that younger priests were more likely to be politically conservative and religiously orthodox compared to middle-aged priests who entered their vocation in the ‘60s era (Stammer 1994). Eight years later, the *Los Angeles Times* conducted another nationwide poll of Catholic priests, which replicated many of the questions on the 1993-94 survey. (Methodological details are available in L.A. Times Archives 2002.) The findings were released in October 2002. The SACP introduced in the

present paper is in part modeled after the 2002 survey from the *L.A. Times*, and in multiple spots findings from our new data are set in comparison to those from 2002.¹

Data from the 2002 *L.A. Times* poll have served as the basis for a number of publications, both journalistic and academic. The *L.A. Times* itself, for instance, ran stories analyzing Catholic priests' assessments of the sexual abuse scandal (Stammer 2002a), the priests' own sexual proclivities (Stammer 2002b), the tendency, again, toward more conservative views among younger priests (Watanabe 2002), priests' evaluations of how things are going in the Church on various topics (Richardson 2002), and their attitudes about life as a priest, Pope John Paul II, the state of the Church in America, and moral issues (Pinkus 2002).

On the academic side, priest-sociologist Andrew Greeley, writing in the wake of the sexual abuse scandal, employed the *L.A. Times* data as his main source of empirical insight in order to address prevailing views and prejudices in the U.S. toward Catholic priests—especially on the matter of celibacy. While correcting some misconceptions, Greeley still framed the Catholic priesthood as “a calling in crisis” (Greeley 2004). Later, the *L.A. Times* data were the basis for demonstrating an institutional selection mechanism for a more conservative priesthood since 1969 as indicated by a stronger effect of ordination cohort than birth cohort on priests' moral orthodoxy and dissent (Sullins 2013). Sullins (2016) used the *Times* data to make comparisons between U.S. Catholic priests broadly and his sample of former Episcopalian priests who had converted to Catholicism, thereby becoming married Catholic priests.

Existing Themes and Notable Changes

Multiple nationally representative surveys dating back more than half a century have documented the beliefs, assessments, demographics, behaviors, and morale of Catholic priests across the U.S., as well as how such things have evolved over the decades (e.g., Hoge et al. 1995; Hoge and Wenger 2003; Gautier et al. 2012). A major concern in the years immediately following Vatican II was a wave of priestly resignations. Those resignations motivated the nation's conference of Catholic bishops to commission a survey of more than 5,000 active and resigned priests, the findings of which are presented in *The Catholic Priest in the United States: Sociological Investigations* (Greeley and Schoenherr 1972, see also Greeley 1972). This 1970 national survey has served as the early landmark and baseline for priest surveys.

Multiple studies have examined the factors associated with leaving or remaining in the Catholic priesthood. Although there historically has been some debate about which factors are most important, the leading candidates are exactly what one would expect: loneliness, dissatisfaction with the work, and the desire to marry (Schoenherr and Greeley 1974; Verdieck et

¹ The sampling frame included diocesan priests as well as those in religious orders, in keeping with their expected proportion in each geographic area. (The sample slightly overrepresents diocesan priests.) The survey was in the field for 16 weeks, and included multiple contacts. Its response rate was 37 percent, and included 1,854 respondents, which was considered statistically representative. Weights were applied afterwards to adjust for region-specific non-representativeness. Specifically, the sample slightly underrepresents priests in the Midwest and East, with a modest overrepresentation of those in the South.

al. 1988; Greeley 2004). Others have highlighted priests' attitudes toward resignations, such as when and if it is appropriate to resign or to return (e.g., Hoge et al. 1988). A concomitant concern with resignations, emerging in the mid 1970s, has been the shortage of priests. The number of priests in the U.S. reached its peak in 1969 and continues to dwindle each year even as the number of Catholics in the U.S. grows, which itself adds burdens to priests (Schoenherr and Sorensen 1982; Schoenherr and Young 1993; Gautier et al. 2012).

Another theme, closely related to resignations and the priest shortage, has been documenting the challenges and problems that Catholic priests say they face in their lives and ministries. In one series of surveys, the top challenge has remained the same since 1970, namely, "the way authority is exercised in the Church" (Hoge and Wenger 2003; Gautier et al. 2012). A sizeable minority of priests indicate loneliness and celibacy as at least somewhat of a problem for them, two factors which spur resignations. The shortage of available priests itself is a pronounced problem; two-thirds of Catholic priests say it is at least somewhat a problem for them personally (Gautier et al. 2012). With the priest shortage compounding year over year, two challenges that have intensified over recent decades are the heavy workload and unrealistic demands and expectations of laypeople (Perl and Froehle 2002; Hoge and Wenger 2003; Gautier et al. 2012). Stress and dissatisfaction is consistently higher among younger priests and among priests lower in the leadership hierarchy (Hoge et al. 1993; Hoge et al. 1995).

Even in the face of real challenges and problems, priests in the U.S. tend to be quite happy and satisfied in their lives and vocations—at least as happy as comparably educated American men (e.g., Hoge et al. 1995; Perl and Froehle 2002; Hoge and Wenger 2003; Rossetti 2011; Gautier et al. 2012). There has been notable change too, with priests' self-reported happiness and satisfaction increasing in the aggregate over the decades following the Second Vatican Council (most recently, see Gautier et al. 2012). This good and rising morale among America's priests has been confirmed in multiple datasets, including in the two *L.A. Times* polls (Pinkus 2002; Greeley 2004). The *Times* data moreover revealed that religiously conservative Catholic priests tended to be more satisfied than progressive priests (Pinkus 2002).

The demographics of priests have been another focus (Young and Schoenherr 1992; Schoenherr and Young 1993; Hoge and Wenger 2003; Gautier et al. 2012). Owing to fewer men entering the priesthood in recent decades, the change of greatest significance has been the dramatic aging of the priesthood; in 1970 the average age among all U.S. Catholic priests was 35 years but forty years later the average age had shot up to 63. Moreover, ordinations to the priesthood now happen later in life, on average. Priests ordained before 1964 were, on average, 27 years old at ordination, but for priests ordained in 1992 or later the average age at ordination was 37. Also, post-Vatican II priests, born after 1960, are more likely than older priests to have been born outside the U.S. (~30 percent) and to be non-white (Gautier et al. 2012).

As one would expect, there has been enduring interest in the moral, theological, and ecclesiological beliefs of Catholic priests as well as assessments of their relative conservative or progressive orientations (e.g., Greeley and Schoenherr 1972; Stammer 1994; Hoge et al. 1995; Hoge and Wenger 2003). On morality, Greeley and Schoenherr's 1970 survey as well as the

1993-94 and 2002 polls from the *L.A. Times* included multiple questions on specific moral issues (Greeley and Schoenherr 1972; Pinkus 2002; Greeley 2004), a subset of which were replicated in the 2021 SACP. It is typical to find that a significant minority of Catholic priests deviate from official Church teachings on matters of sin and morality, and on some topics more than half of priests will indicate unorthodox or dissenting beliefs, especially on the topics of birth control and masturbation (Greeley and Schoenherr 1972; Pinkus 2002; Greeley 2004).

The specifically theological and ecclesiological beliefs of U.S. priests have been documented since shortly after Vatican II, including an emphasis on the shifting theology of the priesthood itself (Greeley and Schoenherr 1972). While not a focus of the present survey, a theme of past priest research has been the rise in the 1960s and 70s of the more approachable, “servant-leader” model of the Catholic priest followed by a return of the ontologically special “cultic” priest as administrator of the sacraments by the mid 1980s (Hoge and Wenger 2003; Gautier et al. 2012). More recent social research has measured Catholic priests’ political attitudes and behaviors (Calfano et al. 2017; Calfano and Oldmixon 2018). A consistent finding of nationwide priest surveys since the mid 1980s, all things considered, is that younger Catholic priests and priests ordained in more recent years tend to be noticeably more conservative on a host of issues, morally, politically, and ecclesiological (Hoge et al. 1988; Young and Schoenherr 1992; Stammer 1994; Watanabe 2002; Hoge and Wenger 2003; Gautier et al. 2012), an important pattern which is further evidenced in the more recent SACP.

The 2021 Survey of American Catholic Priests

The Survey of American Catholic Priests was fielded by the Austin Institute and drew on two different sampling frames.² For the first, the Official Catholic Directory’s (hereafter OCD) approximately 6,000 clergy email list was rented and the survey was distributed using Qualtrics in late 2020, with a follow-up reminder sent several weeks later. The OCD is the primary repository of Catholic priest data in the U.S., and thus represents the most systematic compilation of contact information on priests in the country. (The 2002 *L.A. Times* survey used the Official Catholic Directory as well but sampled a stratified subset of 80 dioceses.)

At the beginning of 2021 the same survey was disseminated to the clergy email list (about 9,000 emails) of a Catholic NGO, with another follow-up email. The overlap between the two lists was not calculable, as the OCD list was rented and not directly accessible to the researchers. Consequently, the response rate is unknown (but lower than the 2002 *Times* survey). In the materials, respondents were instructed to take the survey only once, and the Qualtrics survey blocked repeat survey takers. 1,164 respondents clicked on the survey, and 1,036 responded to the year of ordination and type of priest questions, which allowed for the calculation of weights. Questions were largely patterned on the 2002 *L.A. Times* survey, but were occasionally modified to accommodate contextual changes (for example, asking about attitudes

² The third author is an unpaid fellow of the Austin Institute, but was not the impetus for the survey. He did, however, consult on its design, which largely replicated the 2002 *Los Angeles Times* survey of priests.

toward Pope Francis instead of attitudes toward Pope John Paul II). However, additional unique questions were also included, primarily around clergy well-being and religious practices.

For weight construction, a dataset derived from the OCD annual book (distinct from the OCD email list) was constructed by scraping the OCD and using regular expressions to extract the number of religious vs. diocesan priests, as well as the distribution of ordination dates. For weighting purposes ordination dates were binned into the categories of 1980 and before, 1981-1990, 1991-2000, 2001-2010, and 2011+. Weighting geographically was not feasible due to the small cell sizes involved. Weights were constructed using the rake method with the R package *aneksrake*, and were validated by the *survey* package.

Three sets of weights were calculated. First, weights specific to the OCD dataframe were calculated, then weights for the NGO; finally, weights for both datasets combined were calculated. Does the use of two distinct dataframes problematize the reliability and representativeness of the data? We do not believe so. While the NGO sample is younger and more diocesan, the weights adjust for this and, as will be seen, when weights are applied the two surveys tell overall stories that are remarkably similar given their different frames, essentially providing an external validity check on each other. There is no evidence of a liberal or conservative response bias. About two dozen respondents emailed concerns, mostly with question wording decisions, with a small handful dealing with perceived liberal or conservative bias, and both sampling frames included plenty of liberal Catholic priests.

Finally, while this paper presents data from the original dataset, we binned and removed some variables in the dataset disseminated for the public for purposes of disclosure avoidance. Given the sensitive nature of these questions, maintaining confidentiality is paramount. Consequently, questions such as exact year of ordination, diocese, and seminary attended have either been removed or, in the case of ordination, binned. Proposed secondary analyses of the survey data, including those reflected in this manuscript, were reviewed by the University of Texas at Austin's institutional review board (IRB ID #: STUDY00001774), which "determined that the proposed activity is not research involving human subjects as defined by DHHS and FDA regulations."

Selected Findings

Here we present selected findings from the SACP. As mentioned, the SACP is largely modeled after the 2002 poll from the *L.A. Times*, and in multiple spots findings from the new data are set in comparison to those from 2002. We break findings down into eight sections: summary comparisons, morale, moral assessments, relationships to and evaluations of bishops, salvation exclusivism, priests' perceptions of the conservatism or liberalism of younger priests, approval of Pope Francis, and the state of the Catholic Church in America.

Summary Comparisons

For starters, a simple way to begin to understand the data is to look at basic comparisons between the average responses for specific survey items. Table 1 displays findings on select items from

three samples: the 2002 *L.A. Times* survey and the two samples which together constitute the SACP, namely, the OCD sample and the NGO sample.

One important finding is that the aging of the priesthood—a major concern in previous priest research—has slowed and perhaps stopped as indicated by the mean age of Catholic priests clocking in at 60 years, just as it was in 2002. Also, a pattern of ordinations later in life is evident. In 2002, the average ordination year was 1967. Surveying priests eighteen years later, if there was no change one could expect the average ordination year to be 1985 (1967+18), but instead the mean ordination year is around 1991—six years later. There is mixed evidence to suggest that Catholic priests continue a trend toward a lower percentage of white priests, with 11 percent nonwhite in the NGO sample contrasted with 6 percent in 2002.

Compared to 2002, Catholic priests in the U.S. today are statistically significantly less likely to say they might leave the priesthood in the next few years, but the change is substantively slight. Very few have any inkling to leave. Unexpectedly, life satisfaction is lower in both current samples than it was in the 2002 *L.A. Times* sample. It is unclear why this change occurred, but it might reflect a period effect in that priestly life and ministry must endure a more challenging cultural and spiritual climate in America than even twenty years ago. A related possibility is that fallout from the sexual abuse scandals is affecting priests' wellbeing.

Catholic priests in the U.S., on average, approve of how the bishop who presides in their diocese is handling his duties the same as they did in 2002, namely, a little better than “somewhat approve.” Priests see the views of the bishop of their diocese on moral issues as “about right,” but priests drawn from the NGO sample are, on average, a hair less likely than the 2002 *Times* sample to judge their bishop's moral views as “too conservative,” which makes sense given the noticeable conservative leaning of the NGO sample. Priests today, it appears, are less comfortable, on average, going to their bishop or the superiors of their order when they need counsel and guidance than were priests in 2002, but the reason for this shift is unclear.

Among priests, the perception is more common now than it was in 2002 that younger priests in America are more theologically conservative or orthodox than their older counterparts. Priests today are also distinctly more conservative than in years past when it comes to the exclusivity of Jesus Christ as the sole path to salvation. Even with these conservative shifts, priests are notably more pessimistic now about the state of their own Church. When asked for an overall rating of how things are going in the Catholic Church in America today, the average rating from priests was closest to “not so good” and statistically significantly lower than in 2002. Or again, asked about the trajectory of the Catholic Church in America, priests in 2002 on average said things were “staying about the same.” By 2020, that average answer took a distinct dip to between “staying about the same” and “getting worse.” One reason for the pessimism might be the spiritual and moral lives of the Catholic laity. Among priests who come into contact with the laity, only about 22 percent said most of the laity they come in contact with are following the Church's teachings on moral issues such as sexuality, marriage, and reproduction. This, too, is a significant decline from 2002, when the figure was 30 percent.

Regarding Catholic priests’ own views of moral concerns, the only issue not to register a statistically significant difference from the 2002 *L.A. Times* data is abortion, for which condemnation by priests has been consistently the highest among the included items. Birth control for married couples and masturbation both are significantly more denounced than in 2002 according to both the OCD and NGO samples. However, these two actions remain the least proscribed across all samples. Other moral issues—like nonmarital sex, homosexual behavior, and suicide to relieve suffering—had more mixed patterns; the average “sin rating” of these latter three was higher than in 2002 among Catholic priests sampled from NGO but demonstrated no statistically significant change since 2002 among priests sampled from OCD.

Whether sampled from OCD or NGO, priests in the more recent survey were, on average, less in favor of female deacons, less in favor of ordaining women as priests, and less favorable toward married priests compared to the 2002 *Times* sample. So, there is a notable conservative shift on ecclesial matters. Likewise, when asked about politics, priests in the recent samples were significantly more likely to describe themselves as conservative compared to 2002.

About four out of five Catholic priests in the U.S. today identify as heterosexual or mostly heterosexual. This is consistent between the OCD and NGO samples constituting the new survey and is unchanged from the 2002 *Times* data. One change is the extent to which celibacy is a struggle. In 2002, 34 percent of priests said maintaining their vow of celibacy was not a problem for them. In both our recent samples, this figure saw a statically significant increase to 41 percent for priests sampled from OCD and 45 percent for those from NGO.

One should expect fewer statistically significant differences between the OCD and NGO samples themselves, since both were samples from Catholic priests in the U.S. at approximately the same time. And that was the case. Nevertheless, some differences emerged. When differences on specific questions were evident between these two samples, those differences showed priests sampled from OCD to be slightly less orthodox than priests sampled from NGO. For instance, the OCD sample were less likely to say the sole path to salvation is through Jesus Christ, although both samples were more conservative than the 2002 *L.A. Times* sample. On moral issues, priests from the OCD sample consistently averaged on the more permissive side compared to NGO, but only nonmarital sex and suicide to relieve suffering rose to the level of statistical significance. Priests sampled from OCD were more likely than priests in the NGO sample to favor the ordination of women as priests, although, again, they were still more conservative than the 2002 *Times* sample. Additionally, priests from the OCD sample, on average, worked fewer hours per week, spent fewer hours in the confessional per week, and were slightly more likely currently to reside with one or more other Catholic priests.

Table 1. Comparison of Weighted Univariate Estimates from Three Samples (means or percent)

	Range	<i>LA Times</i> 2002	OCD 2020	NGO 2021
Religious priest (rather than diocesan)	0,1	0.32	0.32	0.32
Years since ordination		33.48 ^{a b}	28.64	27.91
Mean ordination date		1967.52 ^{a b}	1991.36	1992.09

Age (years)		60.85 ^b	60.75	59.37
Hispanic	0,1	0.06	0.05	0.04
Nonwhite	0,1	0.06 ^b	0.08	0.11
Likely to leave priesthood	1-4	1.20 ^{a b}	1.14	1.12
Satisfied with life as priest	1-4	3.64 ^{a b}	3.51	3.51
Level of approval for own bishop	1-4	3.12	3.10	3.10
Bishop's views of moral issues	1-3	2.16 ^b	2.13	2.09
Feels comfortable going to the bishop	1-4	2.93 ^{a b}	2.72	2.70
Younger priests more conservative	1-5	3.91 ^{a b}	4.37	4.32
Jesus Christ sole path to salvation	1-4	3.08 ^{a b}	3.24 ^c	3.46
Rating of Catholic Church in America	1-4	2.60 ^{a b}	2.22	2.25
The Catholic Church in US is getting better	1-3	2.09 ^{a b}	1.67	1.68
Laity following Church's moral teachings	0,1	0.30 ^{a b}	0.21	0.23
Nonmarital sex is a sin	1-4	3.45 ^b	3.45 ^c	3.60
Abortion is a sin	1-4	3.69	3.65	3.72
Birth control for married couples is a sin	1-4	2.78 ^{a b}	2.95	3.05
Homosexual behavior is a sin	1-4	3.28 ^b	3.31	3.41
Suicide to relieve suffering is a sin	1-4	3.40 ^b	3.36 ^c	3.49
Masturbation is a sin	1-4	2.71 ^{a b}	3.00	3.05
Favor ordination of female deacons	1-4	2.64 ^{a b}	2.35	2.21
Favor ordination of female priests	1-4	2.35 ^{a b}	2.01 ^c	1.77
Favor ordination of married priests	1-4	2.98 ^{a b}	2.60	2.45
Politically conservative	1-5	2.93 ^{a b}	3.32	3.38
Kinsey scale (sexual orientation)	1-5	1.75	1.73	1.76
Heterosexual (or mostly heterosexual) vs. neither	0,1	0.79	0.81	0.77
Celibacy is not a problem / does not waver in vow	0,1	0.34 ^{a b}	0.41	0.45
Self-reported happiness	1-3		2.32	2.34
Self-reported health	1-4		3.03	3.05
Frequency of praying divine office	1-5		4.28	4.37
Hours per week of priestly work	1-8		5.17 ^c	5.59
Living with other priests	1-7		1.60 ^c	1.23
Personal visit with your bishop	0-5		1.03	0.98
Level of approval for Pope Francis	1-4		3.20	3.18
Urban	0,1		0.33	0.29
Suburban	0,1		0.38	0.39
Rural	0,1		0.28	0.32
Number of parishes	1-5		1.45	1.53
Hours of exercise per week	1-11		2.55	2.52
Hours in the confessional per week	1-12		1.60 ^c	2.18

A superscript ^a indicates the mean scores displayed in column 2 (LA Times 2002) are statistically-significantly different ($p < 0.05$) from the same in column 3 (OCD 2020), without additional controls.

A superscript ^b indicates the mean scores displayed in column 2 (LA Times 2002) are statistically-significantly different ($p < 0.05$) from the same in column 4 (NGO 2021), without additional controls.

A superscript ^c indicates the mean scores displayed in column 3 (OCD 2020) are statistically-significantly different ($p < 0.05$) from the same in column 4 (NGO 2021), without additional controls.

Morale

Morale has been one of the persistent concerns of previous priest research. Two aspects of morale are displayed in Figure 1. In 2002, 87.9 percent of Catholic priests said it was “very unlikely” that they would leave the priesthood in the next few years, and by 2021 the figure had risen slightly to 91.6 percent. At the same time, life satisfaction for Catholic priests has declined, from 72.1 percent in 2002 saying they were “very satisfied” with their life as a priest to 62.0 percent saying the same in 2021. As already said, we can’t say for sure why life satisfaction for priests has gone down over the last two decades, but one possibility is that a cultural environment in America increasingly hostile to Catholic thought and practice has diminished the subjective wellbeing of priests. Another possibility is that increased public distrust of Catholic priests following the sexual abuse scandals is negatively affecting some priests’ wellbeing. Looking at both “somewhat” and “very” satisfied together (not shown), the figures are more similar: 93.5 percent in 2002 and 92.8 percent in 2021.

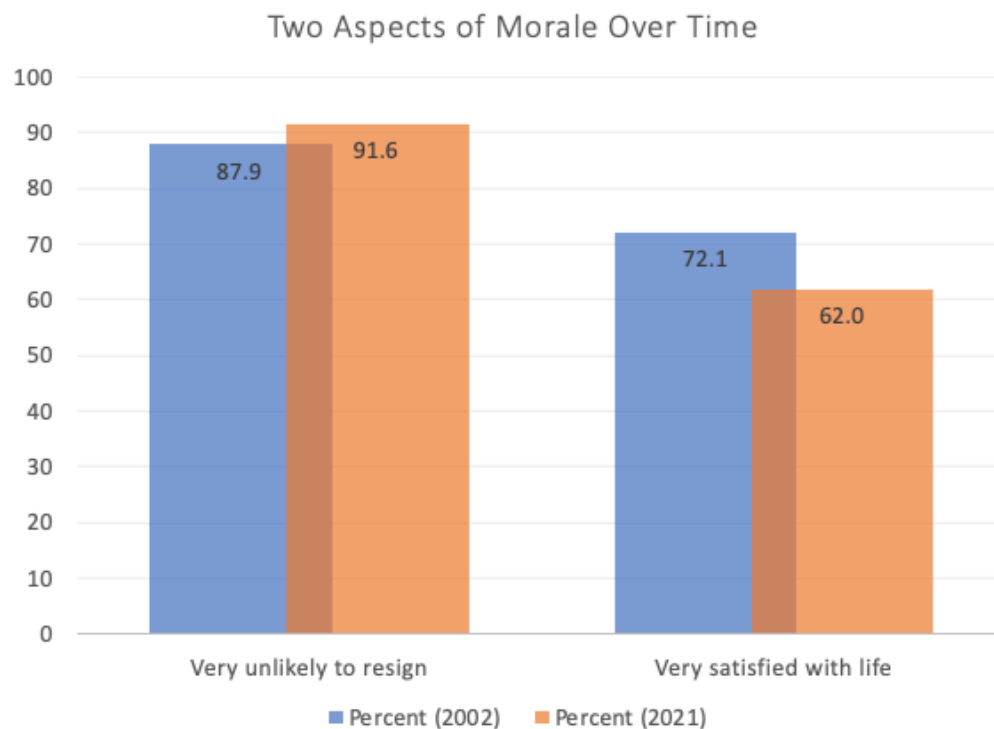


Figure 1. Morale over time. Data: 2002 L.A. Times and 2021 SACP [Weighted]

Among possible further analyses, one might wonder if priestly morale is related to their assessment of the state of the Church in America. Figure 2 displays reluctance to leave the priesthood and life satisfaction, both broken down by priests’ rating of the Catholic Church in

America today. It is evident that for both measures a priest’s assessment of the Church is tied to his own subjective wellbeing as a priest.

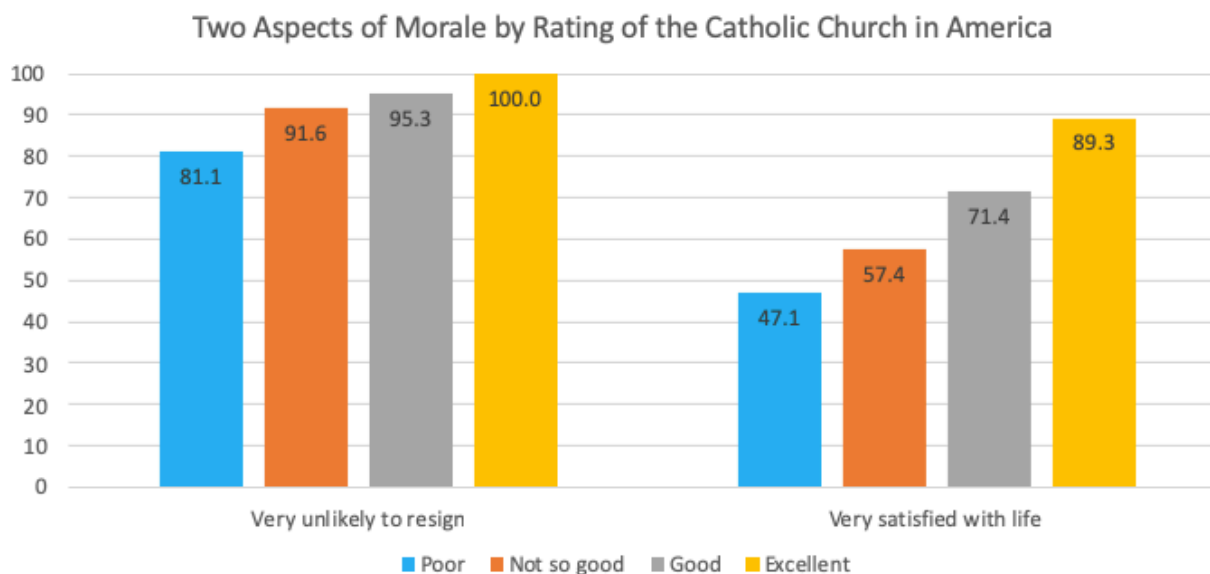


Figure 2. Morale by Rating of the Church. Data: 2021 SACP [Weighted]

Moral Assessments

Let us examine more closely Catholic priests’ own assessments of moral issues. The survey presented seven actions, and priests were asked to indicate whether each action was a sin “always,” “often,” “seldom,” or “never.” Findings are displayed in Table 2. According to official Catholic teaching each action is always a sin. So, on these seven items we see at least a significant minority of priests deviating from Catholic teaching. As with the 2002 *L.A. Times* data, fewer than half of Catholic priests say that birth control and masturbation are “always” sins (Pinkus 2002). Additionally, just under half of priests say in-vitro fertilization for married couples is “always” a sin. The most proscribed action is abortion, with more than seven-in-ten Catholic priests indicating it is “always” a sin.

Table 2. Are These Actions Sins?

	Always	Often	Seldom	Never
Nonmarital Sex	61.0	28.3	9.6	1.0
Abortion	72.2	23.7	3.9	0.2
Birth Control	39.2	27.0	25.8	8.1
In-Vitro Fertilization	49.2	18.1	23.4	9.3
Homosexual Behavior	57.6	21.7	17.7	3.1
Suicide to End Suffering	61.0	21.9	12.8	4.3
Masturbation	41.8	24.4	27.1	6.7

Data: 2021 SACP [Weighted]

Moreover, Table 3 shows the number of items, from zero to seven, that responding priests selected as “always” a sin. Again, official Catholic teaching says that each action is always a sin, so these findings give another indicator of priestly orthodoxy and dissent. Looking at valid (non-missing) cases of the SACP on these items, about three-in-ten Catholic priests today say all seven actions are “always” a sin. On the other end of the spectrum, 18.1 percent of priests say none of the seven presented actions is “always” a sin.

Table 3. Number Out of Seven “Always” a Sin

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
0	153.3	14.8	18.1	18.1
1	104.4	10.1	12.3	30.5
2	74.9	7.2	8.8	39.3
3	55.1	5.3	6.5	45.8
4	57.1	5.5	6.7	52.6
5	61.8	6.0	7.3	59.9
6	90.9	8.8	10.7	70.6
7	248.7	24.0	29.4	100.0
(Missing)	189.9	18.3	NA	NA

Data: 2021 SACP [Weighted]

As one example of potential further analyses, we broke down responses to the sin questions by ordination year, with ordinations grouped into cohorts by decade. Figure 3 depicts the results for the question of suicide to end suffering. In the 2002 *L.A. Times* data, represented in blue, one sees a relatively conservative cohort of priests ordained prior to 1960 followed by more permissive priests ordained in the 1960s and 70s. After the permissive cohorts, there is a trend toward more conservative moral views with each successive cohort. The new SACP data, represented in orange, reveal a pattern of increasing orthodoxy by ordination cohort on the morality of suicide. Priests ordained in the 1970s were the least likely to say suicide to end suffering is “always” a sin, and the percentages increase with each successive ordination cohort, up to 79.4 percent for Catholic priests ordained in 2010 or later. As a whole, a curved pattern emerges, with pre-1960 priests relatively conservative, more permissive views of suicide among priests ordained in the 1960s through the 80s, and Catholic priests ordained since 2000 proving the most conservative on the morality of suicide. Also, there is a liberalizing trend within ordination cohorts over the past nineteen years as evidenced by the dips in percentages of priests selecting “always” for those who were ordained in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s.

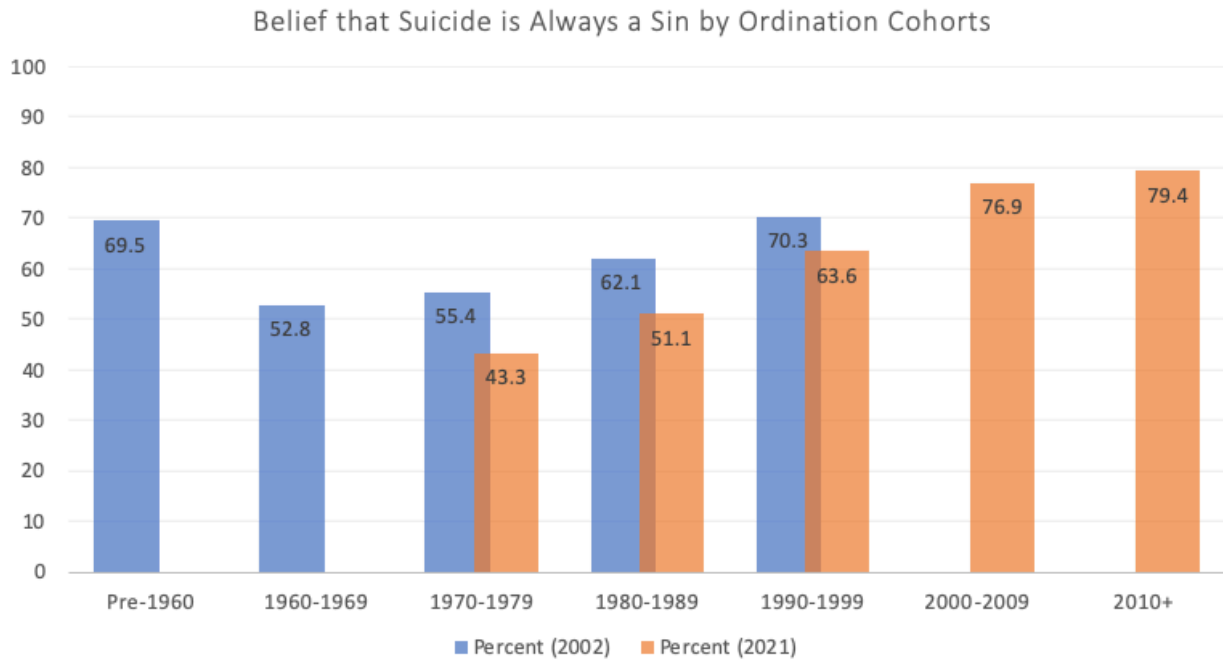


Figure 3. Suicide. Data: 2002 L.A. Times and 2021 SACP [Weighted]

A similar pattern emerges for priests’ moral assessments of abortion. Belief that abortion is “always” a sin broken down by ordination cohorts is displayed in Figure 4.

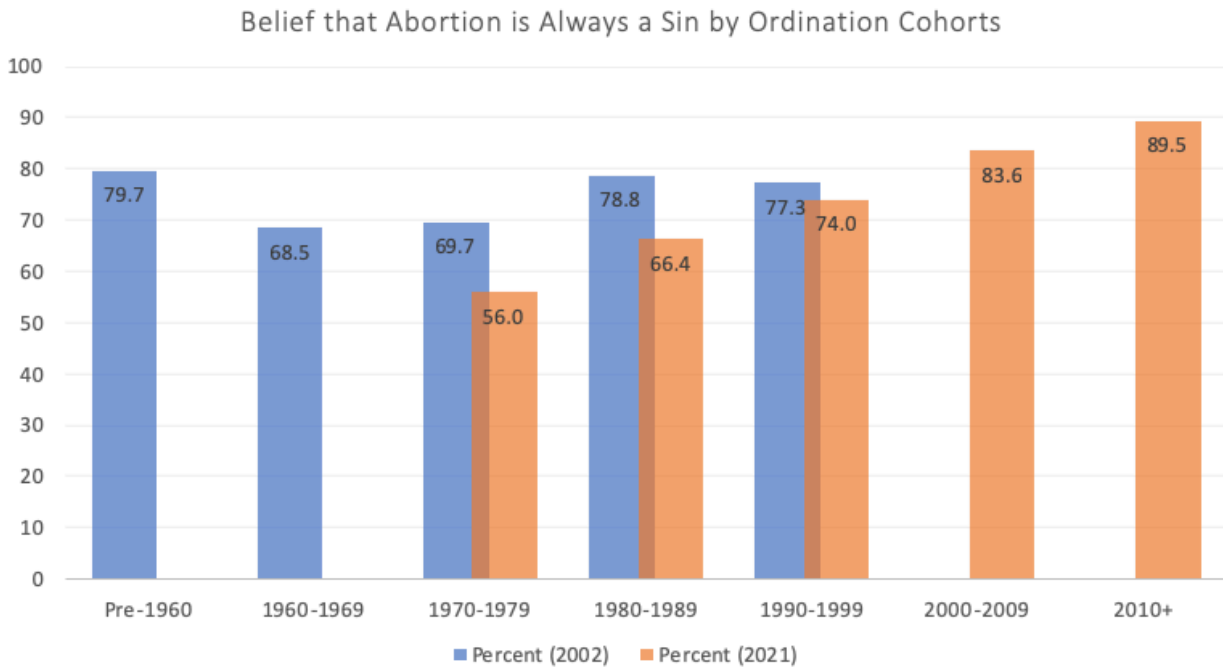


Figure 4. Abortion. Data: 2002 L.A. Times and 2021 SACP [Weighted]

Relationships to and Evaluations of Bishops

Table 4 displays the data, in greater detail, on Catholic priests’ relationships to—and evaluations of—their own bishops. In both 2002 and 2021, just over three-quarters of Catholic priests said their bishops’ views on moral issues are generally “about right.” Among priests who didn’t think their bishop’s views were “about right,” it was much more common for priests to see their bishop’s views as “too conservative” than as “too liberal.” From 2002 to 2021, there has been a shift toward discomfort regarding going to one’s bishop or to the superiors of one’s order for counsel and guidance, with only about a quarter of priests now saying they feel “very comfortable.” In contrast, over the same period, priests’ levels of approval for their own bishop are statistically unchanged. About 78 percent of priests either “somewhat” or “strongly” approve of how the bishop who presides in their diocese is handling his duties, the same as in 2002. Finally, more than half of Catholic priests reported that in a typical year they do not have a personal visit with their bishop. Just under a quarter of priests said they visit their bishop about once a year.

Table 4. Relationships to and Evaluations of Bishops (percent)

<i>Bishop's views of moral issues</i>	Too liberal	About right	Too conservative		
2002	3.4	77.4	19.2		
2021	6.0	77.0	17.0		
<i>Comfort going to your bishop</i>	Very uncomfortable	Fairly uncomfortable	Fairly comfortable	Very comfortable	
2002	14.8	14.4	33.7	37.1	
2021	16.7	20.7	36.6	25.9	
<i>Approval for own bishop</i>	Disapprove strongly	Disapprove somewhat	Approve somewhat	Approve strongly	
2002	6.7	14.9	38.2	40.2	
2021	6.3	14.9	41.5	37.4	
<i>Personal visits with your Bishop</i>	None	One	Two	Three	Four or more
2021	53.4	23.8	9.9	4.4	8.6

Data: 2002 L.A. Times and 2021 SACP [Weighted]

Salvation Exclusivism

Respondents were asked the degree to which they agree or disagree with this statement: “The sole path to salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ.” Table 5 displays the findings for the two SACP samples aggregated, both overall and broken down by priests’ self-identified political leanings. Overall, 58 percent of Catholic priests in the U.S. “agree strongly” that faith in Jesus is the only path to salvation and another quarter “agree somewhat.” One out of six priests disagree to any extent. In the 2002 *L.A. Times* data (not shown), one-quarter of priests marked “agree somewhat” (as in the SACP data) but 48.3 percent—10 percentage points fewer—selected “agree strongly.” This left roughly one out of four Catholic priests (27.4 percent) disagreeing to any extent, a notably bigger proportion than in the more recent data.

Moreover, how conservative or liberal Catholic priests are on political matters maps onto their views on this question of theology. The correlation between these two survey items is

modest (0.38), but a clear pattern is visible as it pertains to agreeing *strongly* and disagreeing *strongly*. (The middle two response categories are less neatly patterned.) For instance, agreeing strongly that the sole path to salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ ranges from 82 percent among priests who identify as “very conservative” to just 19 percent among those who are “very liberal” with each step along the spectrum of political leanings following this progression. Likewise, disagreeing strongly with this theological claim ranges from next to zero among “very conservative” priests up to 39 percent among priests “very liberal” on politics, again with neatly ordered changes in the percentages with each move along the political spectrum.

Why does conservatism and liberalism on politics reveal such clear patterns on a claim about salvation and God, at least on the extreme ends? The answer, we think, can be found in recent research in moral psychology. Principles on matters of politics and religion correspond so often and so well, including among Catholic priests, because religious beliefs and political beliefs both rely on moral judgments. And conservatives and liberals, it turns out, are attuned to quite different sets of moral intuitions. For liberal-progressives, there is a strong emphasis on care, fairness, and openness, while conservatives place relatively greater emphasis on in-group loyalty, authority, order, and sanctity/purity (Haidt 2012). Affirming strongly that everlasting life or destruction hinge centrally on one narrow gate, the means to which are defined and safeguarded by the institutional Church, aligns with the building blocks of conservative moral intuitions and violates liberal-progressive ones. Vice versa for disagreeing strongly. That is one reason religious dispositions and political dispositions are frequently clustered together.³

Table 5. Salvation Exclusivism by Political Leaning (percent)

	All	Very Conservative	Somewhat Conservative	Moderate	Somewhat Liberal	Very Liberal
Agree Strongly	58.0	82.0	73.5	53.0	29.6	19.3
Agree Somewhat	25.5	17.1	16.2	32.5	31.2	28.0
Disagree Somewhat	9.3	0.0	6.8	8.7	22.0	13.6
Disagree Strongly	7.3	0.8	3.5	5.7	17.2	39.1

Data: 2021 SACP [Weighted]

Next we examine how responses to this question of salvation exclusivism differ by ordination cohorts. Figure 5 displays the percentage of priests who “agree strongly” that the sole path to salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ broken down by the decade in which respondents were ordained to the priesthood. The pattern across ordination cohorts mirrors the pattern observed previously regarding the morality of suicide and abortion—namely, a relatively conservative cohort of Catholic priests was ordained prior to 1960, followed by a liberal or permissive era of priests ordained in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, and most recently we see a

³ Which is not to say such building blocks of moral intuitions fully explain religious and political views. Additionally, for instance, there are substantive directives and mechanisms within the Catholic interpretive tradition that encourage people and especially its clergy toward conservatism, both religiously and politically.

conservative turn among men ordained to the priesthood after 2000. In the aggregated SACP data, represented in orange, the percent of priests who “agree strongly” with salvation exclusivism ranges from a low of 40.2 percent among priests ordained in the 1970s (or earlier) up to 75.9 percent among the latest cohort of priests. Since the 1970s, each successive ordination cohort of priests is more conservative on salvation than the cohort before it.

One notable difference between the morality/sin questions examined earlier and the theology question here is the direction of change within ordination cohorts over time. On sin, there was a liberalizing trend within cohorts over the last nineteen years, whereas on soteriological exclusivism there is a conservatizing trend within cohorts across time as evidenced in Figure 5 among priests ordained in the 1980s and 90s. One potential explanation for this conservatizing within cohorts is that Catholic priests become more willing to affirm Jesus as the sole path to salvation as they age. Another possible explanation is a period effect, meaning there is something about the early 2020s distinctly different from 2002 that makes Catholic priests more willing to affirm exclusivism. The latter strikes us as plausible. Even as American culture grew more permissive on matters of “sin,” relativism—informed by postmodernist thinking—went out of intellectual fashion among college-educated Americans in the first decade of the new millennium. Now, a “whatever you believe is fine” relativism is being displaced by a renewal of particularities as promoted by clashing epistemic and identity communities.

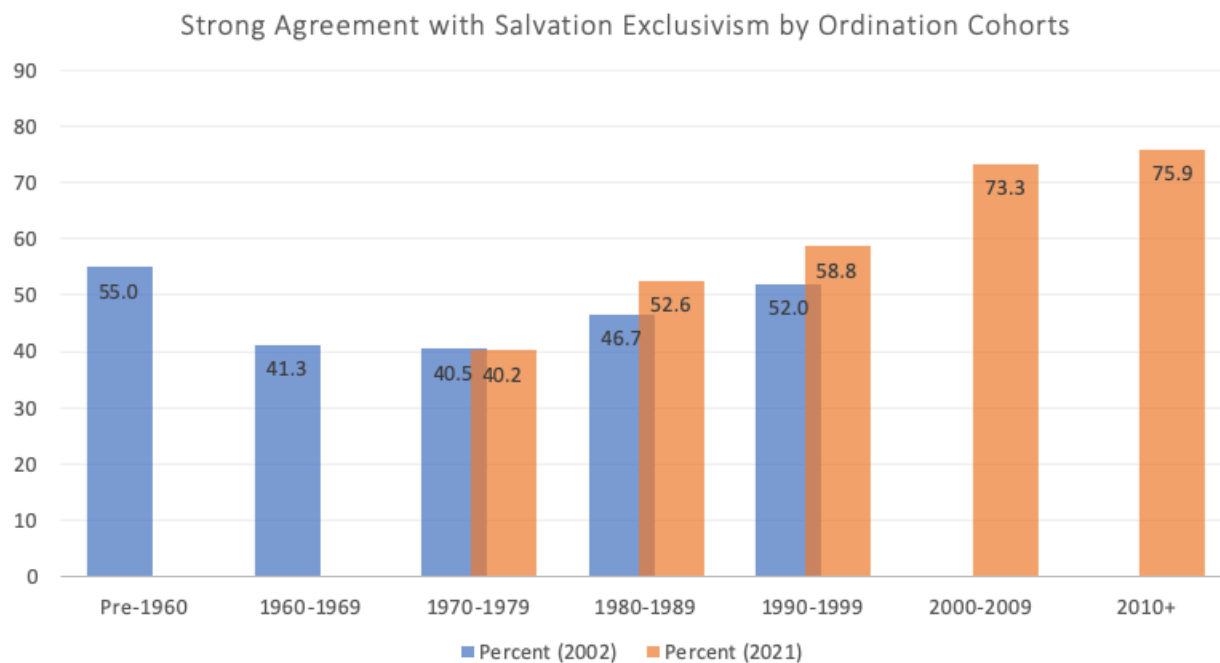


Figure 5. Salvation Exclusivism. Data: 2002 L.A. Times and 2021 SACP [Weighted]

Perceptions of Younger Priests

As mentioned, the perception is more common now than it was in 2002 that younger priests in America are more theologically conservative or orthodox than their older counterparts. Figure 6

depicts this item in greater detail. In both 2002 and 2021, about 47 percent of priests said younger priests in America were “somewhat more conservative” than their older counterparts. However, the important shift occurred as it pertains to seeing younger priests as “much more conservative.” The percentage of respondents seeing younger priests as “much more conservative” increased from 28.6 percent in 2002 to 43.7 percent in the current survey. This shift in perception thinned out the opposite side of the response options; not a single priest in the SACP said younger priests today are “much more liberal” than their older counterparts.

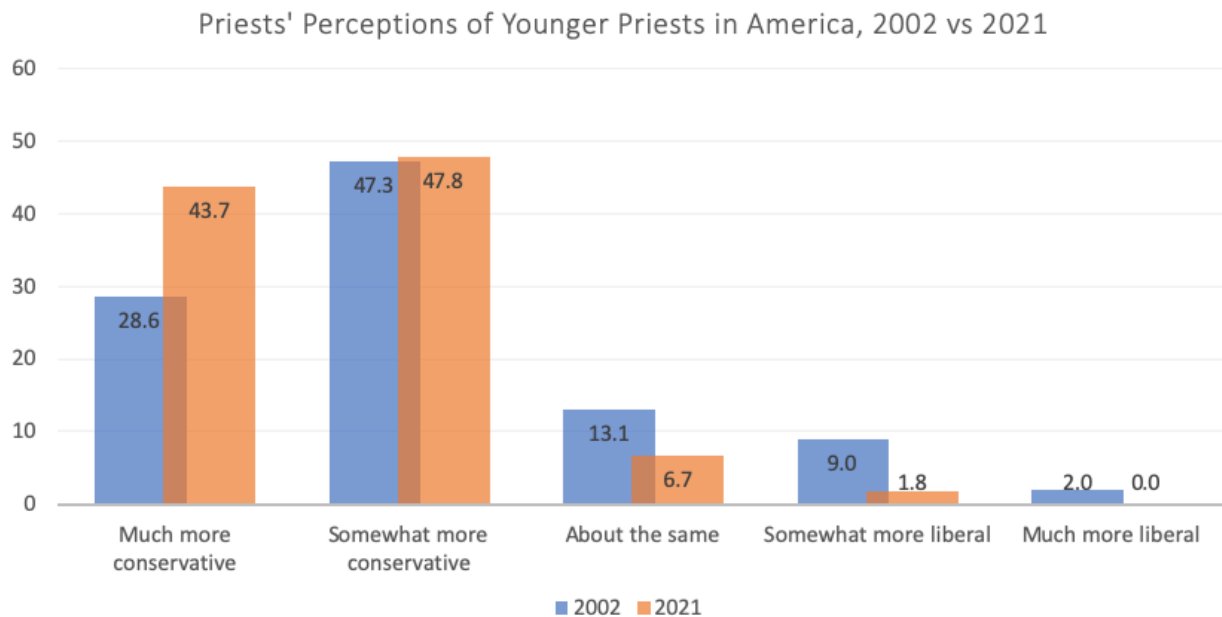


Figure 6. Perceptions of Younger Priests. Data: 2002 L.A. Times and 2021 SACP [Weighted]

Approval of Pope Francis

Pope Francis, who is commonly considered more progressive in a variety of ways, currently receives a range of approval and disapproval from American Catholic clergy. It should be established up front that while it might strike some readers as strange (or unorthodox) that Catholic priests would “disapprove” of the Pope, in fact it does not violate Catholic teaching to have or express frustrations with the supreme pontiff. Overall, a bit more than half (53.4 percent) of priests in the U.S. “approve strongly” of how Pope Francis is handling his duties, and another 22.8 percent “approve somewhat,” as shown in Table 6. However, there is a notable correlation between priests’ political views and their approval of Pope Francis (-0.60). Among priests who describe their politics as “very conservative,” for instance, 68.9 percent disapprove of Pope Francis, whether “somewhat” or “strongly.” On the other end of the spectrum, remarkably, not a single priest in our dataset who describes himself as liberal on politics (whether “somewhat” or “very”) disapproves of the job Pope Francis is doing (whether “somewhat” or “strongly”).

Table 6. Approval of Pope Francis by Political Leaning (percent)

	All	Very Conservative	Somewhat Conservative	Moderate	Somewhat Liberal	Very Liberal
Approve Strongly	53.4	9.0	23.9	68.7	90.9	87.8
Approve Somewhat	22.8	22.0	33.0	24.4	9.1	12.2
Disapprove Somewhat	13.5	23.6	28.1	4.4	0.0	0.0
Disapprove Strongly	10.3	45.3	15.0	2.4	0.0	0.0

Data: 2021 SACP [Weighted]

If a measure of political conservatism and liberalism correlates well with approval of Pope Francis, is the same true for a measure of theological conservatism and liberalism? In Table 7, approval of Pope Francis is crossed with agreement that faith in Jesus Christ is the sole path to salvation. The correlation is weaker than for politics at -0.34. Among priests who “agree strongly” with salvation exclusivism, one in three (33.5 percent) disapprove (whether “somewhat” or “strongly”) of how Pope Francis is handling his duties. In contrast, priests who disagree with salvation exclusivism are more likely to approve of Pope Francis.

Table 7. Approval of Pope Francis by Salvation Exclusivism (percent)

	All	Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
Approve Strongly	53.4	37.0	70.8	80.0	85.9
Approve Somewhat	22.8	29.4	16.7	12.2	10.6
Disapprove Somewhat	13.5	18.7	7.2	6.9	2.4
Disapprove Strongly	10.3	14.8	5.3	0.9	1.2

Data: 2021 SACP [Weighted]

Lastly, an unambiguous pattern emerges when approval of Pope Francis is broken down by year of ordination grouped into decades, as depicted in Figure 7. Priests ordained in more recent years are less likely to approve of how Pope Francis is handling his duties. Among Catholic priests ordained before 1980, 79.9 percent “approve strongly” of the current pope, and only 5.0 percent disapprove to any extent. As cohorts become more recent, approval of Pope Francis steadily decreases and disapproval steadily increases. In the latest cohort of priests, ordained in 2010 or later, only 20.0 percent “approve strongly” of Pope Francis and nearly half (49.8 percent) disapprove, whether “somewhat” or “strongly.” Evidence from other survey items suggests this pattern is attributable to the relative conservatism of the recent cohorts.

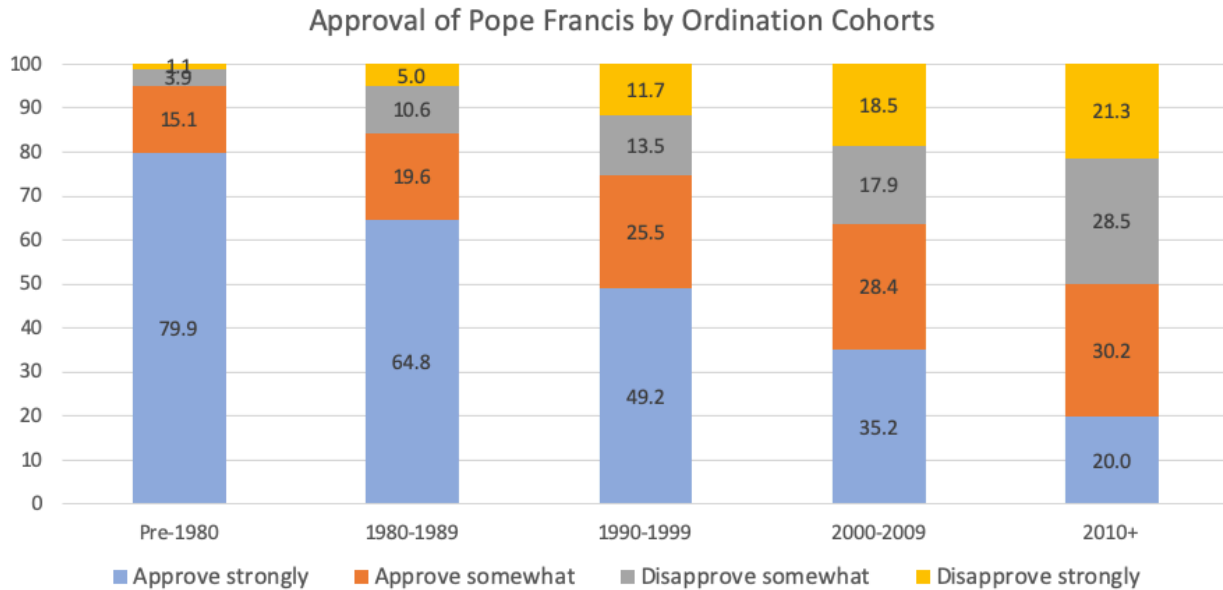


Figure 7. Approval of Pope Francis by Ordination Cohorts. Data: 2021 SACP [Weighted]

State of the Catholic Church in America

Both the 2002 *L.A. Times* poll and the SACP asked Catholic priests: “Overall, would you rate things in the Catholic Church in America today as...” with response options as “Excellent,” “Good,” “Not so good,” and “Poor.” The basic findings are displayed in Figure 8. In 2002, more than half (57.8 percent) of priests rated the Catholic Church as doing “good,” whereas by 2021 more than half of priests (51.3 percent), in a clear shift, rated the Church as doing “not so good.” Over that same period, the percent of priests rating the Catholic Church as “poor” increased from 4.8 percent to 13.3 percent. In short, there is a pronounced turn toward pessimism among priests in the U.S. as it concerns the current state of their own Church in America.

Figure 9 depicts ratings of the Catholic Church in America broken down by priests’ political convictions. It is apparent that pessimism is common regardless of political ideals. Just over half of priests indicate things in the Catholic Church in America are “not so good,” and this holds true across the full range of the political spectrum, from “very liberal” to “very conservative.” That the Catholic Church is not doing well is something liberal and conservative priests can agree on even if their reasons for saying so are different. As it happens, if one segment of Catholic priests can be identified as relatively less pessimistic about the current state of the Church in America, it is those who identify themselves as politically moderate.

Rating of the Catholic Church in America, 2002 vs 2021

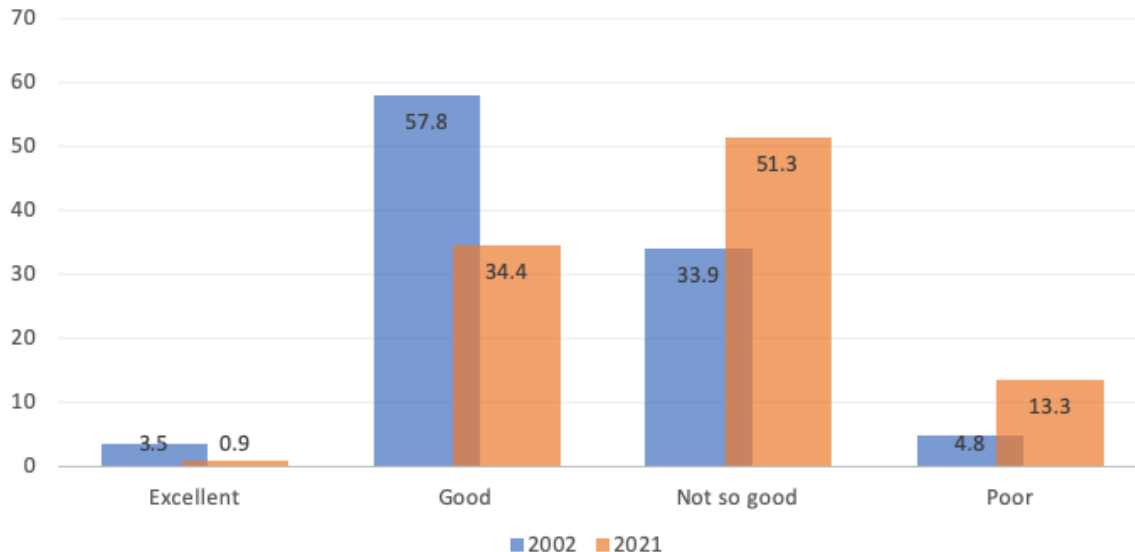


Figure 8. Rating of the Catholic Church. Data: 2002 L.A. Times and 2021 SACP [Weighted]

Rating of the Catholic Church in America by Political Leaning

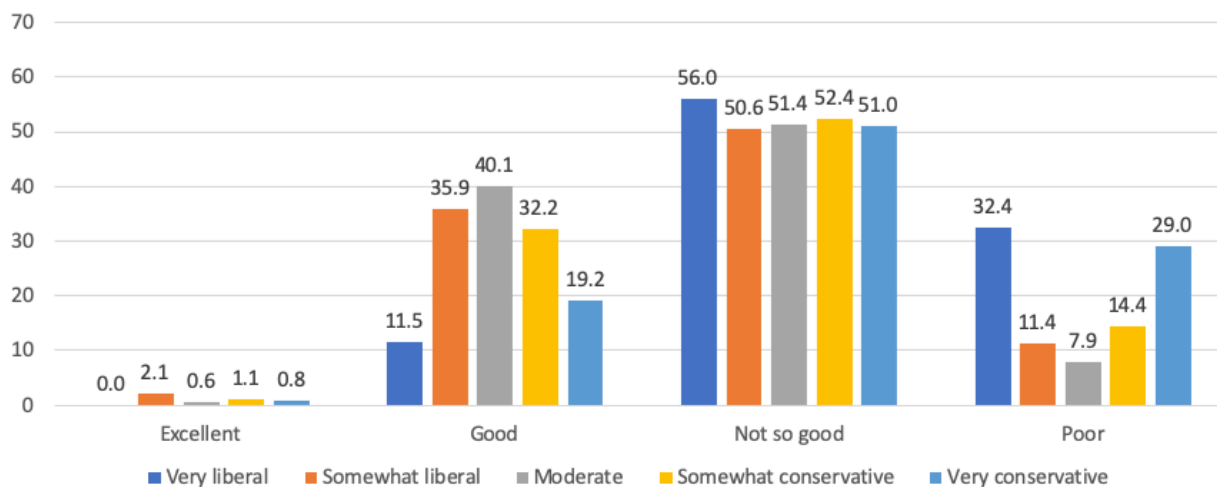


Figure 9. Rating of the Catholic Church by Politics. Data: 2021 SACP [Weighted]

Examining priests’ ratings of the Catholic Church in America by ordination cohorts reveals that their answers are irregular. Given the clear patterns that ordination cohorts reveal for moral and other issues, it is noteworthy that there is no consistent trend across cohorts. The most important pattern, in this case, is not across cohorts but instead between the 2002 survey, represented in blue, and the 2021 survey, represented in orange. This is suggestive that the turn toward pessimism since 2002 is a period effect, not a cohort effect, meaning there is something

distinct about the present time compared to nineteen years earlier that makes priests (of whatever cohort) less likely to say things are going well for the Catholic Church in America.

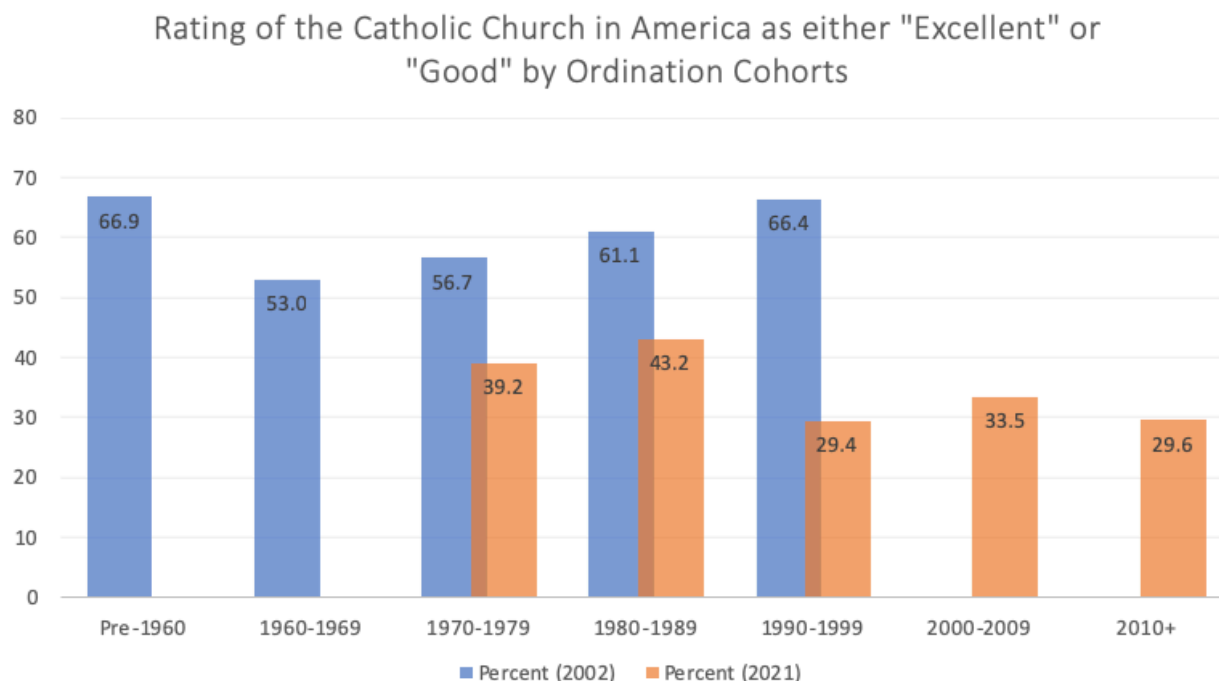


Figure 10. Rating of the Catholic Church in America by Ordination Cohorts. Data: 2002 L.A. Times and 2021 SACP [Weighted]

Findings about ratings of the Catholic Church in America are mirrored in a question about the current trajectory of the Church, that is, whether things generally are “Getting better,” “Staying about the same,” or “Getting worse.” As shown in Figure 11, since 2002 there has been a significant shift in priests’ perceptions of the current trajectory of the Catholic Church. In 2002, 37.1 percent of priests said things were “Getting better,” but by 2021 that figure had declined to 16.1 percent. On the other hand, in 2002, 28.3 percent of priests said things in the Church were “Getting worse,” but by 2021 that figure had risen to 47.7 percent.

Finally, in Figure 12, breaking down responses to the trajectory question by ordination cohorts reveals, once more, that the answers are irregular. There is no consistent pattern of responses across cohorts. Instead, the most important pattern in this case is just between the 2002 survey as a whole, represented in blue, and the 2021 survey, in orange. This, again, is suggestive that the turn toward pessimism since 2002 is a period effect, not a cohort effect.

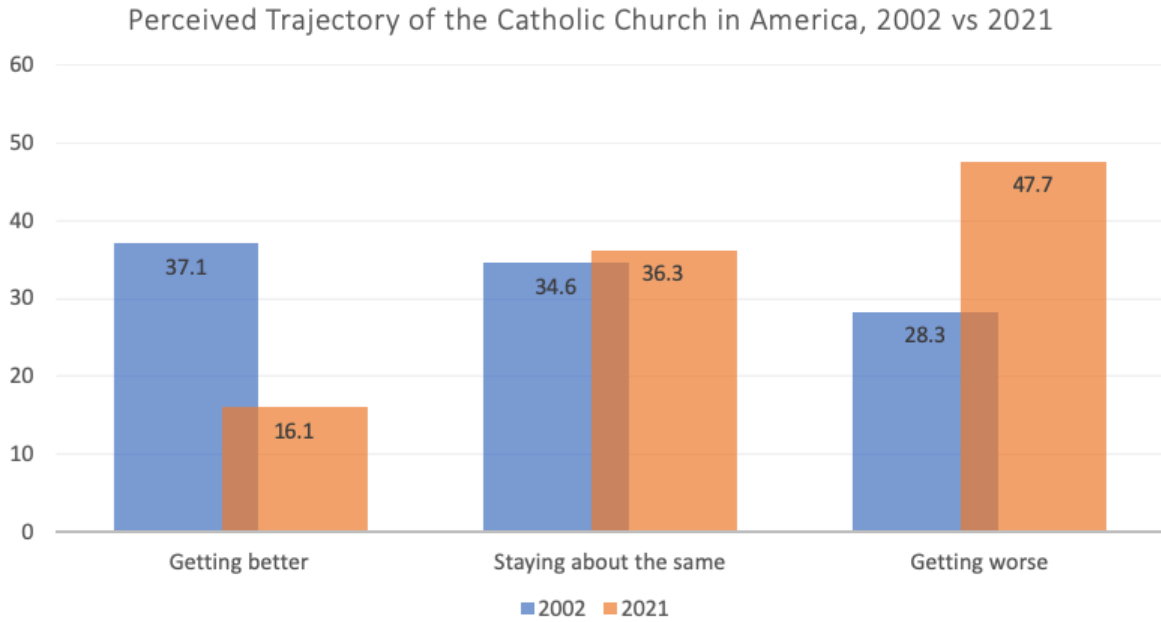


Figure 11. Trajectory of the Catholic Church. Data: 2002 L.A. Times and 2021 SACP [Weighted]

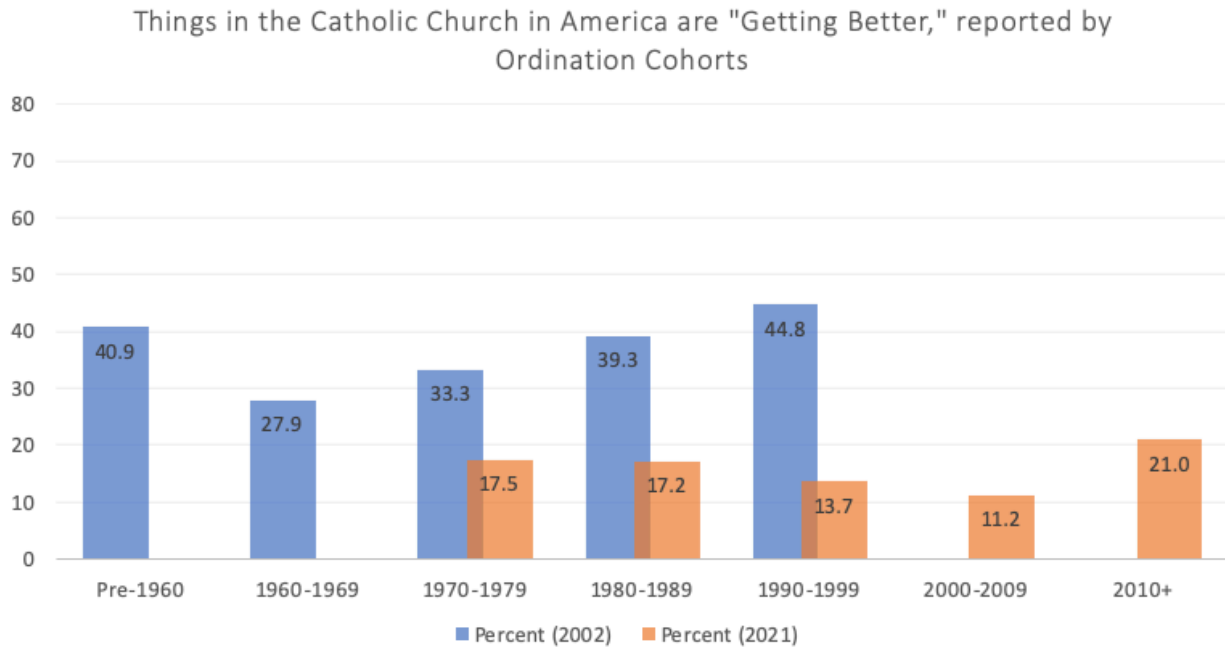


Figure 12. Catholic Church in America is “Getting Better” by Ordination Cohorts. Data: 2002 L.A. Times and 2021 SACP [Weighted]

Discussion and Conclusion

The present-day beliefs, assessments, behaviors, and morale of Catholic priests in the United States, and the ways such things have changed over the years, provide an illuminating look into the Church in a particular national setting. Such an understanding is especially pertinent as

Catholic clergy find themselves ministering and living in relation to what is often perceived as an increasingly difficult, “post-Christian” American cultural context (Anderson 2019; Chaput 2017). This report has presented an introductory overview of the SACP as the most recent attempt to hear from a national sample of Catholic priests and given a selection of the survey’s basic findings. Even with the fairly simple technical level of the analyses presented in this paper, a number of findings and patterns emerged that we believe are worthy of notice.

For instance, the aging of the priesthood—a major concern in previous priest research (Young and Schoenherr 1992; Hoge and Wenger 2003; Gautier et al. 2012)—has slowed and perhaps stopped as indicated by the mean age of Catholic priests clocking in at 60 years, just as it was in 2002. Additionally, there is mixed evidence to suggest that Catholic priests continue to trend toward a lower percentage of white priests. While priests in the U.S., on average, approve of how the bishop who presides in their diocese is handling his duties the same as they did in 2002, priests today are less comfortable going to their bishop or the superiors of their order when they need counsel and guidance, although the reason for this change is unclear.

If the major story of the SACP had to be summarized briefly it would be noticeable conservative shifts among U.S. priests over the last two decades coupled with a turn toward pessimism about the current state and trajectory of the Catholic Church in America. Two ways of looking at the data both reveal a number of conservative shifts—namely, comparisons of the average responses on survey items between the 2002 *L.A. Times* poll and the SACP and, secondly, the analyses of patterns when results are broken down by ordination cohorts. Catholic priests in the U.S. today tend to be more politically conservative than priests were nineteen years earlier. They also tend to be more conservative nowadays on ecclesial matters, such as the ordination of female or married priests. On whether specific actions are morally licit, conservative shifts are evident both in the averages and by looking at cohort differences. The one theological question included in the SACP—whether faith in Jesus Christ is the sole path to salvation—likewise showed a conservative move, both on average and for more recent cohorts. The priests tend to see this themselves, as they are more likely in 2021 than they were in 2002 to say younger priests are more conservative than their older counterparts.

Over the same time that priests became more conservative in multiple ways, their perceptions of the current state of the Catholic Church in America took a pessimistic turn, now with a majority of priests saying things in the Church are “not so good”—and this holds true across the political spectrum. In terms of trajectory, moreover, nearly half say things are “getting worse.” The data patterns suggest this turn toward pessimism is a period effect, not a cohort effect, meaning there is something about the early 2020s distinctly different from 2002 generating these changes. We suggested three issues that may contribute to this pessimism: one, being in contact with Catholic laity who increasingly seem not to follow the Church’s teachings, two, a heightened sense that American society has become a challenging, “post-Christian” cultural and spiritual climate, and, three, the negative social fallout directed toward priests after the sexual abuse scandals. At this juncture it must remain an open question.

Here is where morale enters. Previous research on priestly morale would lead us to expect that multidimensional conservative shifts would be accompanied by noticeably better life satisfaction among the clergy (e.g., Pinkus 2002). In reality, life satisfaction now is slightly lower than in 2002. It seems that the turn toward pessimism about the state and trajectory of the Catholic Church in America is overriding any conservative shifts, since priests' own subjective wellbeing is tied up with their outward-looking assessments of the Church.

This manuscript serves as an overview and introduction to the SACP dataset. Going beyond the basic findings presented here, we believe the SACP data are ripe for further analyses by religion researchers. As noted, these data have been made available at the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) as of early October 2021. Researchers can expand upon the topics already addressed here by creating additional cross-tabulations, breaking down outcomes of interest with yet other variables to gain better understanding of the factors involved. Additionally, a clear next step in analysis of the SACP dataset is to select outcome variables of interest—say, priests' life satisfaction or level of approval of Pope Francis or any number of other options—and run regression analyses to sort through the relative strengths and importance of multiple variables at once.⁴ Many of the analyses in this paper set the SACP findings in comparison to the 2002 *L.A. Times* survey of Catholic priests, but further insights into longer-term trends could be gained by also employing the *Times*' 1993-94 survey of Catholic priests, which likewise shares many of its questions in common (Stammer 1994).

The SACP dataset includes items that were not previously mentioned or did not receive central focus in this paper. For example, the survey instrument included questions on which country respondents were raised in, perceived threats to American families, the quality of seminary formation, frequency of praying the Divine Office, whether one's diocese provides adequate resources, hours of exercise per week, hours per week in the confessional, workload (in weekly hours), self-rated health, happiness, and four questions on how well bishops have addressed the sexual abuse crisis. The current authors are also analyzing matters related to sexuality among priests. In that vein, the dataset includes questions on priests' own sexual orientations; their experience with celibacy; the perceived existence of homosexual subcultures in seminaries, dioceses, and religious institutes; whether gay men should qualify for the priesthood; as well as the morality/sin questions about nonmarital sex, artificial methods of birth control for married couples, homosexual behavior, and masturbation.

These topics are worthy of attention, and potential further analyses abound. We invite religion researchers to download and use the SACP data, which we trust will advance our social scientific knowledge of American Catholicism and the priesthood.

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⁴ In regression analyses using the combined SACP dataset, we recommend including a dummy variable (OCD vs. NGO) to distinguish any remaining unique sample source effects.

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