

VERSIONE PROVVISORIA

Patricia Ryan Garcia, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Analysis of the campaign “What have you done for your marriage today?”. “Little things can make the difference”

CASE STUDY: A CATHOLIC CAMPAIGN TO PROMOTE MARRIAGE

Engaging Americans in the Case for Marriage

In the United States of America, the outlook for marriage as a fundamental societal institution is grim. Following the lead of north western European countries, more and more Americans are bypassing marriage in favor of cohabitation, serial monogamy and other types of living arrangements, resulting in a 50% decline in the marriage rate in the last fifty years. This phenomenon is reflected in the statistics for Catholic marriage in the United States, with 48% fewer marriages recorded in Catholic parishes over the past 20 years. Sociologists studying these trends point to the rise of what they call “secular individualism” as the chief cause. Such individualism places greater emphasis on personal independence and tolerance for diverse life styles and diminishes the importance of religious faith and social traditionalism.

Even more disturbing, is the growing socioeconomic marriage gap in the USA. Americans who have college degrees and the higher incomes that go along with them are more likely to marry and less likely to divorce than other socioeconomic groups. Conversely, the marriage rate is in steep decline among less-educated and poorer Americans, while out-of-wedlock births among these groups are rising.

Why is this disturbing? Beyond the moral implications, every available statistic points to significantly better life outcomes for U.S. children raised by two married parents. Statistics also show that married couples in the USA are overwhelming healthier, wealthier and more emotionally stable than those who do not marry. Unfortunately, it seems that those that would benefit most from marriage are marrying the least.

A Snapshot of U.S. Catholic Opinions about Marriage

Marriage statistics for U.S. Catholics are not vastly different from those of the general population according to a recent survey. “Marriage in the Catholic Church: A Survey of U.S. Catholics” was commissioned in April 2007 by the U.S. bishops' then-Committee on Marriage and Family Life.

Involving 1,008 adult U.S. Catholic respondents 18 years of age or older, the survey was completed in June 2007 by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, via Knowledge Networks, an Internet polling firm.

The survey found that 53 percent of adult Catholics currently are married. The report said: “Twenty-five percent have never been married. Thirteen percent are divorced or separated (12 percent divorced and 1 percent separated). Five percent are widowed and 4 percent are currently unmarried and living with a partner.” These proportions, the report said, “are generally similar to those for the U.S. population as a whole.”

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The survey also found that “two-thirds of currently married Catholics were married in the church,” 23 percent of adult Catholics have been divorced” and 11 percent of adult Catholics “have divorced and are currently either remarried, living with a partner or widowed.” Again, the report observed that these proportions also “are generally similar to those for the U.S. population as a whole.”

The survey found that Catholics who frequently attend Mass “are considerably more likely than infrequent attendees to find their views of marriage consistent with a number of statements that align with the Catholic view of marriage – for example, that marriage is a vocation, that marriage is a lifelong commitment, that marriage contributes to the common good of society, that married love reveals God and that the sacrament of marriage extends beyond the wedding day.”

Here are just a few more of the survey’s many findings:

- “The proportions of divorced or separated Catholics who went through various marriage preparation programs and activities are similar to those of married Catholics. However, divorced and separated Catholics are less likely than married Catholics to have discussed each of the following topics with their future spouse prior to marriage: trust and commitment, openness to having children, intimacy or sexuality, and family backgrounds or history.”
- “About six in 10 Catholics have heard that a non-Catholic spouse must promise to have their children raised Catholic. Of these respondents, eight in 10 believe this to be an accurate statement. Thus, overall, 47 percent of Catholics have heard this inaccurate statement of church teaching -- and believe it is true.”
- “About two-thirds of single Catholics are aware of the church’s teachings regarding openness to children as being essential to marriage (68 percent).”
- “Only 15 percent of divorced Catholics have sought an annulment. Of those who have, 49 percent had the request granted.”
- Fifty-four percent of never-married Catholics who say they may marry in the future consider it “very important” to agree with their future spouse “on the number of children they will have.”
- “Seventy-six percent of adult Catholics believe divorce to be acceptable in ‘some cases.’ Seventeen percent say divorce is acceptable in ‘all cases,’ and 7 percent say it is ‘not acceptable in any case.’”
- “Seventy-one percent of Catholics agree at least ‘somewhat’ that couples do not take marriage seriously enough when divorce is easily available.”

Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz of Louisville, chair of what is now the USCCB Subcommittee on Marriage and Family Life, said that the findings of the survey reveal “how important it is to give more support to couples to help them sustain and, if necessary, reconcile and restore their marriages,”

It is encouraging, Archbishop Kurtz said, “to learn that the majority of Catholic adults say they are either somewhat or very familiar with church teachings on marriage. However, it is “sobering to note that relatively few Catholics seem willing to seek church-sponsored help for difficulties” they experience, the archbishop said.

A National Pastoral Initiative

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Recognizing that marriage in the United States is in crisis, the U.S. Bishops voted overwhelmingly to make strengthening marriage a priority goal in their 2008-2011 planning cycle, continuing with the National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage (NPIM) they launched in 2004. The multi-year effort to communicate the meaning and value of married life for the Church and for society brings together Catholic teaching and pastoral practice, social science research, and the experience of married couples. The bishops believe that this is a critical moment to join with others who seek to strengthen marriage and that the Catholic Church can make a distinct contribution to shaping public awareness about the value of marriage.

Through the NPIM, the U.S. bishops aim to strengthen marriage as both a human institution and a Christian sacrament. Specifically, they wish to:

- offer a Catholic witness to the meaning, value, and sanctity of marriage;
- connect Catholic belief and teaching with current marriage issues;
- strengthen marriage through the life cycle by listening to the experience of the Christian faithful;
- work with our fellow citizens to promote marriage-friendly laws, public policies, and other social strategies;
- promote more and better ministries to marriage, particularly in parishes;
- help couples themselves to witness to the value of marriage;
- encourage dioceses, national church organizations and movements to provide leadership and resources on behalf of marriage.

A major goal of the Initiative is to communicate positive, helpful messages about marriage. In consultation with the USCCB communications department, the Committee requested and received a grant of \$750,000 USD from the Catholic Communication Campaign¹ to develop a comprehensive marriage resource Internet Web site and television and radio public service messages that would serve to build a positive perception of marriage and commitment, bolster those with a lack of confidence about marriage, and demonstrate that the Catholic Church is “pro-marriage” and supports married couples.

A Public Service Message from...

In the US, the broadcast airwaves “belong to the people,” a concept derived from the right of free speech that is proclaimed in the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. Radio and television stations apply for licenses to use the airwaves as trustees of a sort. In exchange for that use, broadcasters pledge to “serve the public interest, convenience and necessity.” Public service announcements or “PSAs” are one way that broadcasters serve their communities. PSAs, as defined by the U.S. Federal Communications Commission are “any announcement (including network) for which no charge is made and which promotes programs, activities, or services of federal, state, or local governments (e.g., recruiting, sale of bonds, etc.) or the programs, activities or services of non-profit organizations (e.g., United Way, Red Cross blood donations, etc.) and other announcements regarded as serving

¹ The Catholic Communication Campaign (CCC) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops provides funding for media programming, projects and resources that promote Gospel values. CCC funds are derived from a national special collection taken up in most U.S. parishes on the third weekend in May. Fifty percent of the collection stays in the diocese and supports local communications efforts, such as televised Masses and diocesan newspapers. The other fifty percent supports the development and production of a wide range of national media projects in the U.S.A. and Catholic communications projects in developing nations.

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community interests, excluding time signals, routine weather announcements and promotional announcements.”

USCCB has been producing and distributing PSAs since the early 1990’s with varying success. Our most successful PSAs are those that are the least denominational in tone, including a series we produced to promote reconciliation at the turn of the millennium. Our Catholic Campaign for Human Development’s poverty awareness PSAs have been very well received and we have also had success with a campaign promoting family communication.

Pre-Cana for a Campaign

Like a successful marriage, our campaign required solid preparation. Following a competitive bidding process, USCCB selected Crosby Marketing Communications of Annapolis, Maryland, to provide research, creative and production services for the project. We began by identifying several target audiences for our Web site and the messages intended to drive traffic to the site, including:

Married individuals---generally happy, but with daily ups and downs

Engaged couples--and those contemplating marriage who may not believe that they can have successful marriages because they have grown up in an environment of divorce or are divorced themselves, and are very aware of the statistics

Those experiencing challenges---married couples who want to improve their marriage and are open to ways to repair it

Public service gatekeepers---responsible for choosing which PSAs are used at various media outlets.

General public---previous research told us that women are more likely to initiate conversations about the “state of the marriage” and are more likely to suggest seeking counseling or attending pre-marital education. Thus, broadcast components could have a slight female skew.

It was also very important that our messages and Web site have a positive pro-marriage tone, while avoiding a negative pitch or the impression that the bishops are “against” something. We wanted to be careful not to appear to address in any way the controversial topic of same-sex marriage and to imply, even subtly, that this campaign was designed to advocate against it.

We tested themes and concepts for our messages with a series of focus groups and in individual interviews with marriage experts. Different focus groups were comprised of individuals who described their marriages as “happy,” others who said they were experiencing difficulty in their marriages, and another group of engaged persons. All groups included a mix of Catholics and non-Catholics.

Our focus groups told us that elements of a happy marriage include:

- Commitment
- Communication
- Common beliefs/goals
- Skills
- Honesty/trust
- Understanding
- Flexibility

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Overall, the focus groups were very positive about a PSA campaign about marriage. They noted that they often “take for granted” their partner or marriage, and need reminders about the importance of both.

Several potential themes were tested with the focus groups including:

“A happy marriage is no accident.”

Derived from the “skills” theme; successful marriages take the right skills.

Feedback from the focus groups found that this theme had good implications and was truthful. Some said it prompted them to reevaluate their own marriages and think of ways to make them stronger. They liked that the message was concise and to the point’

“Find the forever in marriage.”

Derived from the “commitment” theme; marriage isn’t disposable, it is a lifelong commitment.

The focus group participants found this theme to be positive and optimistic and somewhat romantic (it reminded some of a Hallmark card verse). It had great potential to appeal to both married and engaged individuals, but skewed female.

But the following concept rose to the top:

“What have you done for your marriage today?”

Based on the concept of participation; that a great marriage needs participation from husband and wife to work.

The focus groups found this theme thought-provoking, inspirational, and a great conversation starter. The research professionals who conducted the focus groups noted that there may be some psychological reasons why this line tested so well. They thought that it allowed viewers/listeners to co-create the meaning behind it---to bring their own personal experiences to it and complete the sentence in a manner that applies to them.

We also thought that this theme would be easy to build off on the Web site where we could provide a variety of tools to help couples “do something for their marriage” every day. Because the spots must maintain a secular tone in order to air in public service time, the website would also be secular on the main pages. We wanted to avoid “turning off” those who are not open to a religious tone, but we also will take advantage of the medium by infusing more “Catholic” topics and language on deeper levels of the site.

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Walking Down the Aisle...

With a great theme to work with, creative development began. The Crosby creative team presented three potential concepts, two of which employed the actual question---*What have you done for your marriage today?*---that had appealed so much to our focus groups.

One concept would deliver the message using a particular literary style and “animation” art form in a scripted and self-contained manner. Another live action concept personified things that work against successful marriage in the character of “Buster.” The third and winning concept proposed used “real people” in candid, spontaneous, interviews answering the question, *What have you done for your marriage today?* Each spot would have an appropriate scripted voice-over narration that captures the spirit of what the “real people” say and relates it to the campaign message.

New York-based documentary director Louis Alvarez and his production company, Center for New American Media (CNAM), were chosen to conduct and record the “real people” interviews. Crews filmed for a day each in Washington, DC, Austin, Texas, New York City, Los Angeles and Providence, Rhode Island. We arranged for temporary placement of billboards and other outdoor advertising sporting the “*What have you done for your marriage today?*” line so that images of them could be captured for the television messages.

We were pleasantly surprised with the high level of cooperation we received from the many people who were approached to appear in the messages---Catholic and non-Catholic alike. All but a few were willing to sign the imposing release form, granting USCCB the rights to use their images, voices and words for the campaign and Web site in perpetuity.

We were blessed with a wealth of great responses that could be easily edited to create the minimum number of television and radio messages planned for the campaign.

Results & Evaluation

The “For Your Marriage” campaign was launched during the annual meeting of the National Association of Catholic Family Life Ministers in Denver, Colorado in June 2007. There was considerable national media coverage of the event and the messages and Web site were enthusiastically received.

The television component consists of three sixty-second messages and three thirty-second messages. For radio, we produced three sixty-second messages and four thirty-second messages.

The “call to action” in the campaign is to get people thinking about the value of marriage; to encourage married people to devote time to strengthening their commitment; and to invite them to visit our Web site---For Your Marriage. The first set of messages was released at the time of the launch in June 2007 and a second set was released in January 2008.

The “For Your Marriage” Web site was designed to appeal to the broadest possible audience, with a particular emphasis on younger people who are the heaviest users of the Internet. The home page features a box with nine different video windows that show a rotating library of answers to the “What have you done for your marriage today?” question using outtakes from the production footage. To keep the site fresh and to attract repeat

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visitors we have several changing features. These include the Daily Marriage Tip, monthly quiz, a book of the month review, and our newest feature, called Marriage in the News.

The messages have also been a hit with radio and television stations. Perhaps because they convey such a simple, upbeat message about the necessity of couples taking responsibility for their marriage—mostly in small, daily acts of love and care—in order to build commitment.

We have also been tracking use of the television and radio messages themselves, thanks to technology provided by Nielsen and Mediaguide. The estimated value of the air time stations have donated to the campaign already exceeds \$8.6 million dollars. USCCB's financial investment in the project is \$750,000.

Here are the results of the PSA distribution as of March 2, 2008:

WAVE I RADIO

January 18 ---March 2, 2008

45,402 Broadcasts

Estimated Value: \$2,860,326

Audience Impressions²: 122,671,100

WAVE II RADIO

January 18 ---March 2, 2008

45,402 Broadcasts

Estimated Value: \$2,860,326

Audience Impressions: 122,671,100

WAVE I TV

July 15, 2007 – March 2, 2008

16,195 Broadcasts

Estimated Value: \$2,202,520

Audience Impressions: 156,895,000\

WAVE II TV

January 18 ---March 2, 2008

1,419 Broadcasts

Estimated Value: \$192,984

Audience Impressions: 21,754,000

INTERNET STATISTICS

Through March 26, 2008, www.ForYourMarriage.org has had 143,542 visitors; with just over 101,000 unique visitors (this number does not count repeat visitors). Most of the traffic—nearly 70%--- is coming directly to the site. The top referring sites include USCCB.org, USCCB publishing, Google and Yahoo. The top five pages viewed on the site leads with the “Marriage Tips,” followed by the main pages for each of the four sections. The average visitor spends four minutes on the site and looks at about five pages of content.

We are exploring Internet advertising to increase Web site traffic and are working to encourage more dioceses and marriage organizations to link to the site.

² Impression=A single instance of an advertisement being displayed

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Looking Ahead

The third and final wave of radio and television messages will be released later this year, once we see the number of new stations airing them declining. Because of the expected influx of political advertising between the party conventions in June and the November presidential election, we will have to time the release very carefully.

We are in the process of securing donated space for billboards that present the “What have you done for your marriage today?” theme with simple graphics that echo the TV messages. The response from outdoor advertising companies has been very positive and we expect to begin seeing billboards early this summer. We are also making the artwork available to dioceses that wish to purchase billboard space.

The Web site will be freshened with new content and graphics. The “Marriage Quiz” will be replaced with a “Dilemma of the Month,” and we will begin a new series of “Daily Marriage Tips” and create a new tab in the “About Catholic Marriage” section devoted to the Catholic wedding ceremony. We will add new articles on the following topics:

- dangers of Internet pornography
- forgiveness
- infertility
- crisis pregnancy
- dating Web sites.

A new look is planned for the home page with a more prominent “What’s New” section, plus we will add new page header photos. We’ll also rotate the home page features to keep site fresh.

As the U.S. bishops continue to work on their pastoral letter on marriage, they will consider the impact of this public outreach effort and determine whether to invest more resources to continue it.

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ENDNOTES

General statistics on marriage in the United States of America are from *The State of Our Unions 2007*, *The Social Health of Marriage in America*, The National Marriage Project, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, 54 Joyce Kilmer Avenue, Lucy Stone Hall B217, Piscataway, New Jersey, USA, 08854-8045.

Statistics on Catholic marriage are from *Marriage in the Catholic Church: A Survey of U.S. Catholics*, by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, released February 11, 2008 and from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Secretariat of Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth.