

This Religious Group Fine and Dandy With Letting Gays Raise Children

Families are one great reason why Pope Francis is coming to America.

Sure, he'll address Congress and the United Nations, too. But Philadelphia—host to the church's World Meeting of Families and Francis' only Mass open to the general public—is the one stop on the three-city, six-day trip where he can greet hundreds of thousands of U.S. Catholic families in person.

Many in the crowd will match the church's ideal family blueprint: one man and one woman married for life and welcoming as many children as God gives them.

But many won't. And a new survey by Pew Research finds that nontraditional family arrangements are fine with many U.S. Catholics. Indeed, many think the church should be more open to them as well.

The survey of 1,016 U.S. Catholic adults, released Wednesday (Sept. 2), finds:

- 25 percent have gone through a divorce.
- Nine percent of those who divorced have remarried.
- 44 percent say they have lived with a romantic partner outside of marriage at some point in their lives, and nine percent still do.

Those cohabitating couples and divorced Catholics who remarried without a Catholic annulment—grave sins in the eyes of the church—are not eligible to receive Communion.

Pew found that “15 percent of Catholics are currently in one of those situations,” said Greg Smith, director of religion

research and co-author of the survey.

Given that obstacle, “it’s no surprise their Mass attendance is low,” said Smith. Only 1 in 4 of those Catholics say they attend once a week, while 41 percent of Catholics overall say they attend weekly, Smith said.

Catholics, however, often disagree with—even defy—church teachings on faith and practice.

On Communion, for example, about 4 in 10 of Catholics who are not eligible for Communion say they still seek the Eucharist when they do attend Mass, Smith said.

And most Catholics, no matter what their family structure, are comfortable with a wide variety of family arrangements that the church does not encourage. The survey asked which family structures are acceptable and as good as any other for rearing children. It found:

- 94 percent say a married mother and father is acceptable, although four percent of those say it isn’t as good as some other arrangements.
- 87 percent say a single parent is acceptable.
- 84 percent say the same for unmarried parents living together.
- 83 percent say the same for divorced parents (although Catholics have a significantly lower divorce rate than Protestants and people who claim no religious identity).

And 66 percent of Catholics say gay or lesbian couples are acceptable for rearing children. That includes 43 percent who say this arrangement is as good as any other family structure.

Although the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has spent a decade battling the legalization of same-sex marriage, Catholics are split: 46 percent say the church should recognize the marriages of gay and lesbian couples—and exactly the same percentage say no.

Catholic doctrine teaches that artificial contraception interferes with true union in a marriage and that couples should always be open to God's gift of children. However, in the survey:

- 76 percent of Catholics—including 65 percent of Catholics who attend Mass once a week—say their church should allow them to use artificial birth control.
- 41 percent say being open to having children is essential to what it means to them personally to be Catholic. Another 41 percent say it's important but not essential.
- 33 percent call opposing abortion "essential" and 34 percent call it important.

No matter how far Catholics stray from the doctrinal path in their attitudes or actions, the pull of the family is strong.

The Pew survey found 56 percent of Catholics—and 46 percent of ex-Catholics, too—say they sometimes participate in Catholic activities such as Mass or attending a family baptism or holiday observance, just because they are important to family or close friends, even if they don't personally believe in them.

Bringing the whole clan to see Pope Francis in Philadelphia might just be one of those occasions.