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Canadian Catholicism showing signs of resilience and growth

New book shows rumours of the demise of the faith in Canada are greatly exaggerated

Over the past several decades, people have claimed that Catholicism is on the decline in Canada, along with religion more generally. But new research carried out by well-known sociologists and pollsters Dr. Reginald Bibby, who holds the Board of Governors Research Chair in the Department of Sociology at the University of Lethbridge, and Angus Reid refute such ideas.

Drawing on national and global data, they maintain that Catholicism in Canada is experiencing new growth and vitality, stimulated by people arriving from around the world in unprecedented numbers. Catholics now number 13 million and comprise some 40 per cent of all Canadians.

What's more, for all the talk about secularization and the decline in the importance of faith, Catholics across the country – including Quebec – do not merely continue to see themselves as Catholic. Bibby and Reid have found that a large majority say their faith is important to them, embrace belief in God, guardian angels and life-after-death, and pray privately. They do not attend as often as their parents and grandparents but they are just as likely to proclaim that they are Catholic and they aren't going anywhere.

Bibby and Reid remind readers that almost 500,000 Catholics arrived in Canada from other places in the first decade of the 21st century – numbers that will remain high as Catholicism experiences unprecedented global growth.

Some 80 per cent of Canadians raised in Catholic homes continue to say they are Catholic, with the figure reaching 90 per cent in Quebec. More than 80 per cent believe in God and pray privately, and some 70 per cent say they have been protected by a guardian angel. About one in four claim they experience God every week.

Some 40 per cent of Canada's Catholics say they receive strength from their faith, with the figure rising to 80 per cent among active attendees. Catholic immigrants tend to be among the most highly committed, but also are among the most morally conservative.

Catholics are just as likely as other Canadians to value compassion and forgiveness, and try to

balance the Ten Commandments and personal opinion – often to the chagrin of Church leaders.

“Catholics are highly divided in their views of sexual and family issues,” says Bibby. “Catholics in Quebec tend to be far more accepting of diverse behaviour and lifestyles than Catholics living in other parts of Canada.”

Bibby and Reid’s overall findings point to a bright future for Catholicism in Canada; there will be no lack of Catholics. The primary question is how the Church will respond to the opportunities and challenges it faces.

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