

Clergy honesty ratings tumble to 32-year low: Reason for decline unclear

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Americans' views of the "honesty and ethics" of clergy have hit a 32-year low, with just half rating ministers' moral caliber as high or very high, according to Gallup's annual Honesty and Ethics Ratings of Professions.

The reason for the decline from 56 percent last year to 50 percent in 2009 is "unclear," according to a Gallup news release, which noted that "now the clergy's ratings are below where they were earlier this decade" at the height of the Catholic Church's clergy abuse scandal.

Barbara Dorris, outreach coordinator for the Chicago-based Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, attributed the drop to ripple effects from seven years of negative press surrounding predatory priests.

"The Catholic Church's ongoing clergy sex abuse and cover-up crisis has also prompted victims in other denominations to step forward, speak up, call police, expose predators, file lawsuits, and speak publicly," she said. "This has, we suspect, also contributed to the diminished view of clergy."

Ratings have declined year by year among Catholics and Protestants, whether they were regular or occasional churchgoers. However, ratings rose among those professing "no religion." Last year, 31 percent rated clergy honesty high or very high; in 2009, that figure inched up to 34 percent.

"Still, ratings of the clergy remain high on a relative basis, ranking eighth of the 22 professions tested this year," Gallup said. Clergy ratings, however, declined the most—6 percentage points—followed by lawyers, with a 5-point drop to 13 percent.

The most highly regarded profession was nursing, with 83 percent judging nurses' honesty and ethics as high or very high. Police officers showed the greatest gain (7 points), to 63 percent.

Bankers' ratings tumbled amidst the financial crisis to 19 percent, down from 23 percent in 2008 and 35 percent in 2007. Ratings of stockbrokers fell to 9 percent, the same level as members of Congress.

The survey was based on telephone interviews with 1,017 adults nationwide with a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percentage points. *-Religion News Service*