

# **Study of the Impact of Fewer Priests on the Pastoral Ministry**

Commissioned by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops

Conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Georgetown University.  
Presented at a public session of the June 2000 meeting of U.S. Bishops.

Summary printed here.

## **Catholic Population Doubles**

- In 1950 there were 28,634,878 Catholics in the U.S. By 2000 this number had doubled to 59,156,237.
- The U.S. Catholic population is increasing particularly in the West and South. The greatest percentage increase is in the Hispanic/Latino and Asian/Pacific Islander populations.

## **Priest Availability Declines**

- In 1950 there were 43,100 priests available for a ratio of 652 Catholics to one priest. In 2000 there were 46,709 priests available for a ratio of 1,257 Catholics to one priest.
- The Catholics per priest ratio in North America (includes Canada) is the lowest in the world with South America having the highest at 7,094:1, Africa 4483:1 and Europe 1336:1.
- The average age of U.S. priests is 57 years for diocesan priests and 63 years for religious order priests. There are 433 priests over the age of 90 and 298 priests under 30. Most ordinations today occur after the age of 30.
- 82 percent of dioceses and eparchies report fewer priests relative to their pastoral needs compared to 1990.
- In 1970 there were 6,602 theology level seminarians. In 2000, there were 3,474. Enrollments have stabilized in the 1990s and have increased slightly over the past three years.

Parishes:

- There are over 19,000 parishes in the U.S. with an average of 3,086 Catholics per parish, an increase of 67 percent from 1950.
- 73 percent of these parishes still have a resident pastor. 2,386 parishes share a pastor and 2,334 parishes are without a resident pastor. 437 parishes are pastored by someone other than a priest (canon 517.2).
- 60 percent of dioceses and eparchies report that more priests are serving in multiple parishes.
- One in six priests active in parish or diocesan ministry is foreign born and the number is increasing.

## Lay Ecclesial Ministers Increase

- Between 1992 and 1997 the number of parish lay ecclesial ministers increased by 30 percent.
- About 30,000 people work as paid professional pastoral associates, directors of religious education (DREs), music ministers and other parish ministers. Another 12,000 are parish youth ministers. An additional 5,000 are employed at campus, hospital, prison and other ministry sites. (ed note: 82 percent of these are women according to Fr. Phillip Murnion's National Parish Life Study).
- Over 30,000 Catholics are in degree-granting or certificate programs preparing for full or part-time ministry.
- 74 percent of dioceses report having "somewhat" or "very much" increased the number of lay ecclesial ministers in parishes, and 86 percent expect to have more lay ecclesial ministers in the future.

## Deacons

- There are almost 13,000 deacons serving in most dioceses and eparchies.
- There are over 2,500 men in formation for the diaconate
- 52 percent of dioceses report "somewhat" or "very much" having increased the assignment of deacons for sacramental or liturgical ministry
- 69 percent of dioceses report employing deacons or lay persons in parish management "somewhat" or "very much" and 87 percent of dioceses expect "somewhat" or "very much" to assign more deacons or lay persons to assist in parish management in ten years.
- Deacons are heavily involved in parish sacramental and liturgical ministries and find it increasingly difficult to maintain balance in their ministry of service to the word, liturgy and charity. They are concerned about how their identity over the long term will be affected by focusing more on sacramental and liturgical ministries during a time of fewer priests.

## ***Parish Strategies***

- 80 percent of dioceses have a vocation recruitment program in place for vocations to the priesthood.
- 43 percent of dioceses report that they “somewhat” or “very much” organize ministry for priests after retirement and 61 percent expect to do so within 10 years.
- 437 parishes have utilized canon 517.2 and are pastored by someone other than a priest. Though 58 percent of dioceses report utilizing the provision of canon 517.2 currently only 22 percent utilize it “somewhat” or “very much.” However during the next ten years 53 percent of the dioceses expect to increase this utilization. Six percent of dioceses assign priests “somewhat” or “very much” to serve one or more parishes as a team according to canon 517.1 while 36 percent indicated they intend to do this in the future.
- 42 percent of the dioceses report reducing the number of masses “somewhat” or “very much.”
- 69 percent of dioceses expect to reduce the number of Masses within 10 years.
- 13 percent of dioceses report closing parishes as a strategy.
- 37 percent of the dioceses report sharing ministry staff (DREŐs youth ministers, etc) with one or more parishes.
- Catholics most favor an increasing use of deacons and lay ministers to help meet the needs of Catholics in a time of fewer priests. Just over half support merging parishes as a way to meet needs.

## **Increasing Ethnic Diversity**

In the U.S. Church 3 percent of Catholics are African American, 2 percent are Asian, 16 percent are Latino, 1 percent are Native American and 78 percent are white, non Hispanic. By 2020 the U.S. census bureau expects the white, non Hispanic populations to increase by only 5 percent while Hispanic/Latino and Asian/Pacific Islander Catholics will increase by 70 percent and 74% respectively.

Eight Committees of the USCCB cooperated in conducting this study:  
Committee for Priestly Life and Ministry,  
Committee for African American Catholics,  
Committee for the Diaconate,  
Committee on Hispanic Affairs,  
Committee on Home Missions,  
Committee on Pastoral practices,  
Committee on Vocations and  
Subcommittee on Lay Ecclesial Ministry

The full Powerpoint presentation of these statistics is available from the USCCB Office on Priestly Life. Call (202) 541-3000

Statistics for individual dioceses were collected but not made public. Contact your diocese for these, or check [www.futurechurch.org](http://www.futurechurch.org) for diocesan statistics from demographers Richard Schoenherr and Lawrence Young's published study: Full Pews, Empty Altars. (University of Wisconsin Press, 1993)

If you still cannot find statistics for your diocese, call the FutureChurch office.

This brochure is part of the Call for National Dialogue on the Future of Priestly Ministry Project developed by FutureChurch in partnership with Call to Action.

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