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The mission of the Church and declining clergy

As preparations got underway for the election of a new pope in April 2005, much attention was paid in the media and academe to problems facing the Catholic Church today. Near the top of most observers' lists of problems was a shortage of priests. In many nations the priesthood is in decline, and in a few, a precipitous decline.

Sociology can contribute to solving problems in the priesthood by providing reliable information. In this paper I will review sociological findings on three topics: the distribution of priests in the world, recent changes in priestly identity, and conditions of priestly life today.

1. Distribution of priests in the world

We need to look at worldwide statistics on Catholic membership and in numbers of priests. The number of Roman Catholics in the world is increasing. The total now is about 1.07 billion. Table 1 portrays trends by comparing 1985 figures with the latest data available. The second and third columns in the table show the trends. Catholic membership growth in the world since 1985 has been 26 percent, with the greatest growth in Africa and Asia (nearly matching the world's population growth of 29 percent in the same period of time). But growth in the number of priests has been zero.

Table 1
World Data on Catholic Membership and Number of Priests

	Total membership (millions) 2002	Change in membership (%) 1985-2002	Change in priests (%) 1985-2002	Catholics per priest 2002	GNP per capita (US\$) 2002
North America	78.8	+22	-17	1,382	35,390
<i>United States</i>	65.5	+23	-16	1,375	36,110
Europe	279.9	+1	-12	1,374	17,730
Oceania, Australia	8.4	+31	-12	1,732	19,960
Central America	123.5	+26	+44	6,763	7,580
Caribbean	25.4	+33	+27	7,983	7,980
South America	306.6	+27	+24	7,138	6,970
Africa	137.4	+89	+62	4,694	2,100
Middle East	2.8	+21	+2	1,189	6,100
South Asia, Far East (including Philippines)	107.5	+54	+65	2,473	4,540
World total	1,070.3	+26	0	2,642	7,590

Note: GNP Per Capita data are from the World Population Data Sheet 2004, published by the Population Reference Bureau, Washington DC. All other data are from the Statistical Yearbook of the Church, published annually by the Vatican.

The trends vary widely from continent to continent. In the United States, membership growth since 1985 has been 23 percent, while the number of priests has fallen off by 16 percent. Europe has seen virtually no growth in membership, while the number of priests has fallen by 12 percent. Africa and Asia have seen large increases in priests, followed by Central America. By contrast, North America, Europe, and Oceania, which are by far the wealthiest portions of the world, have seen decreases. (I need to explain that 60 percent of Catholics in Oceania are in Australia.) Put plainly, the wealthy nations (North America, Europe, and Australia) have been losing priests, while the rest of the nations have been gaining priests. And yet, it is in the wealthy regions of the world where Catholics have the greatest access to priests.

The fourth column in table 1 reports the number of Catholics per priest in 2002. Latin America is unique in the large numbers of Catholics per priest--that is, in its dearth of priests. The fifth column shows the relative wealth of the nine regions, measured in gross national product per capita. Note that the wealthy regions, North America, Europe, and Oceania, have by far the fewest Catholics per priest (i.e. the most priests in service per 1000 laity). They are far wealthier than the rest of the world. The poor regions have many fewer priests available. The Middle East is an unusual region with very few Catholics, but it has unusually numerous priests for its rather low economic level, and in this respect it is anomalous; it is also unique in other ways.

The falloff in number of priests has occurred in most of the developed nations. With the exception of Poland, all have faced sizable decreases in seventeen years. In sum: the wealthy nations have the money, and the poor nations have the people and the seminarians.

2. The priest shortage in the United States

In 2004 there were 1,453 laity per priest in the nation, and that number compares with 652 back in 1950 and 778 in 1965.¹ In 1900 it was 899. The year 1950 was a highpoint in availability of priests; before that it was lower.² Since the 1980s, the number of priests has dropped 9 to 11 percent per decade, and it shows signs of a continuing decline in the years ahead. The drop off in religious priests has been relatively sharper—about 20 percent per decade, compared with diocesan priests—who fell about 8 to 10 percent per decade. The average age of priests (active and retired) in 2001 was 60, and the average age of non-retired priests was 56. Diocesan priests average five years younger than religious. Ordinations have varied between 440 and 540 in recent years, but with a long-term gradual decline. Today each year the American seminaries are producing priests at between 35 and 45 percent of the number needed to keep the priesthood at a constant size.

Meanwhile the American Catholic membership has been growing about 12 to 14 percent per decade, largely as a result of immigration and the larger number of children that immigrants have. In sum, the number of priests is falling while the number of laity is growing, thus predicting fewer and fewer priests per 1000 Catholics in America in the future. Many Catholics today are pondering institutional adjustments to ease the problem, since a long-term continuation of present-day trends will weaken the Church.

Most Catholics in America, but not all, agree³ that we have a priest shortage today. There has been some confusion as to what constitutes a “shortage.” Let me explain that “shortage” can be defined in three ways. The first is statistical, based on the number of Catholics per priests in different regions, as shown in table 1. This measure, objective and simple, leads us to conclude that the United States faces no priest shortage relative to other parts of the world. In Latin America, for instance, the number of Catholics per priest is five times as high.

The second definition depends on the *feeling* of lay Catholics in one nation or another that a priest shortage exists. For anyone to feel that there is a shortage, he or she would have had to experience a situation in which more priests were available, either in their own nation at an earlier time or in another

nation. It is instructive to remember that in the United States there was no discussion of a "priest shortage" until the 1980s. At that time the *recent change* in availability of priests began to produce a perception of shortage. The same kind of feeling would arise if an individual had lived previously in another country where more priests were in service per thousand Catholics. Thus a Catholic moving from the United States to Brazil would feel that there is a shortage of priests, but a Catholic who had always lived in Brazil, where the number of priests was continually lower, would say "What shortage?" since he or she has never known anything else.

In Latin America, which has never enjoyed a large number of priests, a style of Catholicism has grown up over the centuries, which does not require as many priests. Latin Americans have evolved a family-based or home-based Catholicism more than a parish-based Catholicism, with religion being taught by grandmothers and mothers and practiced in the home. Nobody felt a need for weekly Mass attendance or frequent sacraments. Put simply, this definition of shortage indicates that there is no shortage in Latin America, because the present situation is *felt* to be normal and customary.

The third definition of "shortage" derives from opportunities lost. It defines "shortage" as not having enough priests to do what is needed. In a country such as Nigeria, Ghana, or India, with millions of people showing signs of readiness for evangelization, additional priests would be a big help. Using this definition, one could conclude that the whole world has a priest shortage! It is true. What Catholic community wouldn't benefit from having more active, capable, and devoted priests working in it? In much of the world the harvest is ready, but the laborers are lacking. Why shouldn't we strive to *double* the number of priests in the world? In my view, we should, for it would truly advance the cause of Christianity. The only limitation would be financial, that is, how many jobs for priests could we sustain in each country, given the money available?

I should add here that the laity-per-priest ratio in American Protestant denominations is much different from that in American Catholicism. For Catholics in 2002 the figure was 1,375 laity per priest. For American Protestants the figure was much lower, between 270 and 300. What causes this difference? One factor is that the more numerous clergy in Protestant denominations is made possible by the higher level of giving by Protestant members; Protestants want more clergy and are willing to pay to get them.⁴ I see no reason why American Catholics wouldn't prefer to have more clergy than they have at present, and why they wouldn't be willing to pay to get them.

Of the three measures of priest shortage, the second is the operative one. It is the one in the minds of most laity, and the one which influences their attitudes. Older American Catholics can remember a time when more priests were available, thus they feel that they are faced with a priest shortage and that it is a major problem.⁵ Many parishes today have no resident priest (in 2003 it was 16 percent); in most parishes fewer Masses are available each weekend, and more priests are being asked to pastor two or more parishes. Nobody likes the trends. The laity want more sacraments, more presence of priests, and more priestly services such as weddings and baptisms; the priests desire to pastor one parish and not more than one; and the bishops want enough capable priests to staff the parishes for which they are responsible.⁶ It is a lose-lose situation.

Nine options

Are there alternatives? Here are nine possible alternatives. Some represent large departures from present-day discipline and others small. Let me clarify that I will mention only the alternatives which have minimal relationship to central doctrine and dogma. The age-old apostolic core of the faith must be defended intact; only peripheral adjustments to today's institutions should be countenanced. Also, incremental changes are all that are possible, since any other changes would endanger church unity. The only option is baby steps.

1. Recruit more seminarians by trying harder.

This is the most obvious course of action. It assumes that more men could be attracted to the priesthood if we encouraged them, if we gave them positive previews of seminary life and ministry, and if we portrayed priesthood correctly. But I have had twenty years experience working with vocation directors and vocation programs in the United States, and I do not believe a major increase in seminarians under present circumstances is possible. We are *already* trying harder, and we are investing immense energy and money into recruiting seminarians. No other Christian denomination is working nearly this hard at recruiting. I would grant that a modest increase might be possible here or there, but not the doubling of ordinations we need. Recruitment should continue, but taken alone it is not a solution.

2. Make celibacy optional for diocesan priests.

The most-discussed alternative is to make celibacy optional for diocesan priests. This is favored today by 71 percent of the Catholic laity and 56 percent of the priests, yet nobody in the hierarchy talks about it. It would be a big step.

In 1985 I was given a foundation grant to estimate if the celibacy requirement is a large or a small deterrent keeping men from entering the priesthood, and on basis of a survey of Catholic college students, I found that it was the single biggest deterrent. If celibacy were optional for diocesan priests, there would be an estimated fourfold increase in seminarians and the priest shortage would be over.⁷ The priesthood would grow until it hits financial limits.

Priesthood with optional celibacy would cost more to Catholic parishes than a celibate priesthood. In 1987 a team of researchers compared the total costs of celibate Catholic priests--including housing, food, pensions, insurance, and salary--with the costs to Lutherans and Methodists of having married ministers. It was found that Lutheran and Methodist ministers cost about 38 to 40 percent more to have on the job than Catholic priests.⁸ A reasonable assumption would be that the cost of a married priesthood to Catholics would be similar. Would Catholic laity contribute the additional funds needed to support married priests? Judging from the American Protestant experience, I believe that if Catholics were well served by a more available cadre of priests, they would.

3. Institute an honorable discharge for priests.

It has been widely noted that young adults today are hesitant about making lifelong commitments. Indeed, there is no occupation in America except Catholic priest or sister that demands a lifelong promise. Protestant denominations do not require it of ministers, since Protestants have a lower theology of ordination, not involving ontology or sacrament. The military, profession, and government all use limited appointments or tours of duty. Would the option of having an honorable discharge, modeled on the military, after maybe ten or fifteen years, with optional renewal, aid recruitment to the priesthood? In the 1985 survey of Catholic college students we tested the idea and found that it would produce many more seminarians. The idea is worth considering, even though it entails an adjustment in the theology of the priesthood, since the adjustment is less drastic than some other options.

4. Ordain women.

The Church could ordain women, and probably a first step would be ordaining celibate women. This was favored by 62 percent of the Catholic laity in a 1999 survey. I have not seen any figures on priests' attitudes on this, but judging from other research, the figure would probably be in the range of 35 to 55 percent in favor. A logical first step would be to ordain vowed women in religious communities. To ordain married women would be a more drastic step. It was favored by 53 percent of Catholic laity in a 1999 survey.⁹

5. Bring in priests from other nations.

International priests have been brought into the United States for many years. At present about 16 or 17 percent of all active priests in the U.S. were born overseas, and the number is growing gradually. In recent ordination classes, 28 to 30 percent were born overseas, and most will stay here. Are there more

priests overseas who are available to bring to the United States? Yes, from several countries, especially India, Nigeria, Philippines, and Colombia. But don't those nations have a worse priest shortage than we have (as shown in table 1)? This question requires some explanation. Those countries indeed have fewer priests per thousand laity than Americans have, in fact *many* fewer. But they have never had as many as we have, so there is no tradition of priests being readily available, and furthermore, in many of those countries there is not enough money to sustain a large cadre of priests, as I said earlier. Poor nations cannot support a large priesthood.

At present about 380 to 400 foreign-born priests are brought into the United States each year; about 30 percent of whom were trained in American seminaries. A portion of these men are brought here explicitly to minister to immigrant parishes, for example, Korean priests invited to minister to Korean Catholics. But the majority minister to multicultural parishes or predominantly European-American parishes.

A survey in 2004 estimated that about 5,500 international priests who began their ministry in 1985 or later are now serving in the United States, of whom 87 percent are diocesan and 13 percent are religious; the majority do not expect to serve in this country their entire lives. The largest numbers are in the Western and Southwestern states, Florida, and the greater New York City area. They have come mainly from Mexico, Colombia, Philippines, India, Vietnam, Nigeria, and Poland. Their average age is 46, which makes them much younger than American-born priests.

With international priests come unique problems. From the point of view of American priests and laity, the most serious of these are: inadequate English skills, cultural misunderstandings, and a too-conservative ecclesiology. From the point of view of the foreign-born priests themselves, the main problems are inadequate orientation to American culture and the ways of the American church, lack of appreciation and respect by American priests, and unfair treatment by diocesan leaders in placements and appointments.¹⁰ These problems could be alleviated by more careful screening of candidates and better orientation programs for new arrivals.

6. Increase the number of lay ministers.

Today there are more lay ministers working in parishes than priests, and their number is growing rapidly. In ten or twenty years they will far outnumber the priests. About 80 percent are female, and in a recent survey the average age was 52. Fifty-three percent have received professional training beyond their B.A.¹¹ Typically, they are in charge of schools, religious education programs, R.C.I.A., youth ministry, liturgy, music, and administration. Priests sometimes feel threatened by them. This is understandable when we recall that many of the lay ministers have received the same education as priests, and they have worked in their parish for a number of years and know more about it than any new priest coming in. Lay ministers can do most of the work in running parishes, but they cannot celebrate the sacraments, thus their usefulness is limited.

Lay ministers will be needed. They are an important resource for expanded parish leadership, and steps could be taken to enhance their official legitimization, their ritual participation, and their spiritual leadership generally. Probably in the future they will do more officiating at Communion Services and more preaching.

7. Expand the permanent diaconate.

We could investigate ways to recruit more permanent deacons and at the same time revise the theology of the permanent diaconate so that deacons could administer all sacraments, not just baptism, matrimony, and last rites. Such a theological revision would be a useful step, but it has ramifications. Nobody, so far as I have seen, has been seriously talking about it.

8. *Accept more married Episcopalian (Anglican) priests.*

There exists in the Catholic Church a special pastoral provision for allowing married Episcopalian priests (and a few ministers of other Protestant denominations) to come in as married Catholic priests. But the protocol is cumbersome and lengthy, and fewer than 200 have signed on over a 20-year period.¹² Why not amend the rules so that inviting them in is more enticing? The process now is very slow, and it entails loss of income in the meantime. Why not aim at quadrupling the annual number coming in?

Catholic priests themselves, in a 2001 survey, agreed. Seventy-two percent said that the Catholic Church should continue to welcome married Episcopalian priests. The Episcopal Church in America has more clergy than it can place, and some of them would be interested in switching. An increased flow to the Catholic Church may damage ecumenical relations, but according to my Episcopalian advisors the damage would not be very severe.

9. *Expand the special pastoral provision to include married Catholic priests.*

We could expand this special pastoral provision to include Catholic priests who have left the priesthood to get married. Estimates of the number of married priests in the United States to whom this might apply range from 12,000 to 20,000. How many would like to return as married priests? To my knowledge, only one research study has asked, and it found that about 20 percent would return, either full-time or part-time.¹³ Let us suppose that there are 16,000 married Catholic priests in the U.S. and that only 30 percent return. That would mean 3,200 more priests--the equivalent of seven years of ordinations at the present rate. This is a large number, making the option an important one. A 2001 survey of American priests asked whether they supported such a move, and 52 percent responded yes.

In addition to these nine options, there is yet another: do nothing. But it isn't very attractive, because present trends predict unhappy priests, unhappy laypersons, and institutional inertia.

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Notes:

1. Catholic trend data are summarized by CARA, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate. <http://cara.georgetown.edu>, accessed April 15, 2005.

2. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "The Study of the Impact of Fewer Priests on the Pastoral Ministry," Unpublished report, June 15, 2000.

3. Not everyone agrees that the American Catholic Church is facing a priest shortage. D. Paul Sullins argues that no shortage exists. He says that while the number of priests in service is declining, this is not a serious problem because Mass attendance among American Catholics is also declining, thus fewer priests are needed. Also the sharp increase in lay ministers allows pastors to delegate major leadership responsibilities to others. See D. Paul Sullins, "Empty Pews and Empty Altars," *America*, May 13, 2002, 12-16.

4. All research has shown that American Protestants contribute to their churches, as a percentage of family income, 2 to 3 times as much as do Catholics. Evangelical Protestants contribute at a higher rate than mainline Protestants. See Dean R. Hoge, Charles E. Zech, Patrick H. McNamara, and Michael J. Donahue, *Money Matters: Personal Giving in American Churches* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 13, 32.

5. A 2003 survey of Catholics found that the priest shortage was rated as the second most urgent problem facing the Church, after the problem of sexual abuse of young people by priests. See James D. Davidson and Dean R. Hoge, "Catholics After the Scandal: A New Study's Major Findings," *Commonweal*, November 19, 2004, 13-17.

6. A recent study by a sociologist who visited parishes without resident priests found that the laity much preferred having resident priests in their parishes, and that the visiting priests serving more than one parish were over-extended. The laity were relieved that at least their parishes had not been closed! See Ruth A. Wallace, *They Call Him Pastor: Married Men in Charge of Catholic Parishes* (New York: Paulist Press, 2003).

7. I have been told several times that Protestants have as much a clergy shortage in America as Catholics. This is false. The Protestant seminaries have been growing in the last two decades, and they produce more ordinations than there are positions available. The only shortages in the Protestant denominations are in small or marginal parishes which newly-ordained ministers do not want to serve. See James D. Davidson, "Fewer and Fewer: Is the Clergy Shortage Unique to the Catholic Church?" *America*, December 1, 2003, 10-13.

8. Dean R. Hoge, Jackson W. Carroll, and Francis K. Scheets, OSC, *Patterns of Parish Leadership* (Kansas City, Mo.: Sheed and Ward, 1988), 58.

9. William V. D'Antonio, James D. Davidson, Dean R. Hoge, and Katherine Meyer, *American Catholics: Gender, Generation, and Commitment* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira Press, 2001), 109.

10. Dean R. Hoge and Aniedi Okure, O.P., *International Priests: New Ministers in American Catholicism* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2006).

11. Philip J. Murnion and David DeLambo, *Parishes and Parish Ministers: A Study of Parish Lay Ministry* (New York: National Pastoral Life Center, 1999); Dean R. Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger, *Evolving Visions of the Priesthood* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003), 127-31.

12. See Joseph H. Fichter, *The Pastoral Provisions: Married Catholic Priests* (Kansas City, Mo: Sheed and Ward, 1989).

13. Andrew M. Greeley, *The Catholic Priest in the United States: Sociological Investigations* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1972), 292.