

Coffins or Cradles?

Catholic and Non-Catholic Population Trends in New York State

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Every year about this time, the attention of the public is brought to bear upon the population problems of the society in which we live. The annual campaign of the Planned Parenthood Federation (formerly known as the Birth Control League) draws the interest of Catholic and non-Catholic alike. This year, as in previous campaigns, a number of ministers and rabbis will no doubt be found among the supporters of birth control measures. We may also expect that Catholic priests will take notice of the movement by recalling to their people the teaching of God's Church concerning contraception and other controversial practices.

With this as a background, it has occurred to me that a brief survey of the comparative Catholic and non-Catholic population trends in New York State would be interesting, timely, and perhaps surprising. While this subject has been of great interest to students of demography, the science dealing with population trends, little factual information has been available.

The most recent and most extensive survey is the article "Trends in the Vitality of Catholics and Non-Catholics," published in the American Journal of Sociology for September, 1935. The author, Professor Samuel Strober of the University of Chicago, studied 40,000 Catholic and non-Catholic couples who married in Wisconsin cities from 1919 to 1930. His conclusion was that at that time and in those places the Catholic birth rate was declining more rapidly than that of non-Catholics.

Professor Strober's article was influential even among Catholic demographers; it was doubtless responsible for the assertion in the May, 1944 *Eccllesiastical Review* that "the Catholic birth rate has declined in recent years so that it now approximates the non-Catholic birth rate." Our own study was undertaken to determine the truth of this assertion. Our article, so far as we know, is the first to consider all Catholic vital statistics on a state-wide basis. It is the only discussion which covers recent years.

We hope to answer such questions as these: How does the recent Catholic birth rate compare with the rate among non-Catholics? What is the size of the average Catholic family as compared with the modern non-Catholic family? What is the present population of the two groups, and what are their prospects for the future?

Necessary Statistics

To determine the vital rates (birth, death, marriage) of any social group, it is necessary to know two things: (1) the number of births, deaths, and marriages during the period of time under consideration; (2) the population, in thousands, at the middle of the period of time being considered. To obtain the respective rates, the first figure is divided by the second. Thus a town of 5,000 population, which has 125 births and 50 marriages during a given year will have for that year a birth rate of 2.5, and a marriage rate of 10. To make a comparison, then, between the Catholics of our state and their fellow citizens who are not of the faith, these statistics for the two groups are needed.

Until recently, it was not possible to obtain reasonably accurate figures. Since 1942, however, we have been in possession of material which makes it possible for us to give with a high degree of accuracy, comparative vital statistics for the two groups, covering the four-year period from 1942 to 1946.

The total numbers of births, deaths, and marriages which took place in the State may be obtained from the *World Almanac* and the *Vital Statistics Review*, published by the State Department of Health.

The corresponding numbers for Catholics who reside in one or another of the seven dioceses which are coextensive with the state boundaries, may be obtained from Kennedy's *Official Catholic Directory*. The non-Catholic numbers may be obtained by subtracting the Catholic figures from the total.

Catholic Figures

Before drawing any conclusions from the figures presented in the *Catholic Directory*, it might be worthwhile to discuss their validity. These figures are ultimately obtained from each Catholic pastor, who is required by Canon Law to submit an annual report on the state of souls in his parish. This report lists, among other things, the number of marriages performed in the past year, the number of funerals, and the number of infant baptisms. The total for each diocese is forwarded by the local chancery to the publisher of the *Directory*. The method whereby the statistics are obtained should inspire some confidence in their accuracy.

Moreover, the figures seem to stand scrutiny very well. One should expect, for example, that the Catholic figures, if sufficient, should show the same trends as the trends shown in the state totals. This they do. For example, 1942 was a year of heavy mortality for the state as a

whole, but the natural and imposed result of the superior Catholic birth rate is a positive age. Because of such previous high birth rate, Catholics would have a high proportion of people to the young, or age brackets, where mortality is much lower. This factor would naturally result in giving to the Catholic segment of the population a lower crude death rate, as present.

If the Catholic population were put at a figure much higher than our estimate of 4,072,000, this would further lower the Catholic death rate, and heighten the non-Catholic rate. A gap much wider than the present 1.2% would tax one's credibility. For this reason we cannot place the Catholic population at more than our present estimate.

Marriage-Rates

For the same span, 1942-1946, there were about 348,000 marriages in the state. Of these, according to Kennedy's *Directory*, 174,000 were performed by the Catholic priest; the average annual number and rate would thus be 33,000 and 8.5%. This leaves a remainder of 374,000, which may be classed as non-Catholic marriages; the average annual number and rate were therefore 33,500 and 8.5%. The state as a whole shows this period a marriage rate of 8.8%.

Matrimonial figures are sometimes expressed as a ratio of "persons marrying" per thousand of population. Since there are two persons involved in every marriage, the "persons marrying" rate would apparently be twice the marriage rate: 21.2% for Catholics, and 19.0% for all others. We say "apparently" because the rates for both groups should be adjusted downward, to make an equitable comparison.

The effect of mixed marriages should be removed from the Catholic group. In the period studied, there were 348,000 persons married by the Catholic priest. Of these, 12% (41,000) were not of the faith. This leaves 307,000 Catholic "persons marrying," an annual average marriage rate of 70,300/million rate of 18.8%.

The non-Catholic "persons marrying" must likewise be adjusted downward to remove the effect of divorced persons attempting remarriage. Divorce is prevalent in the non-Catholic population to no equitable comparison can be made between the two groups unless compensation is made for the existence of divorce and attempted remarriage among the non-Catholics of our state.

Just as the inclusion of persons who are not really Catholics makes the Catholic "persons marrying" rate appear higher than it really is, so the inclusion of divorced persons attempting remarriage makes the non-Catholic "persons marrying" rate appear higher than it really is. For reasons it would be tedious to burden the reader with, we estimate that of the 748,000 persons not married by the priest, at least 12% (90,000) were divorced persons attempting to remarry. This leaves 658,000 single (or widowed) persons among the non-Catholics not married by the priest; we should also add the 41,000 non-Catholic partners in mixed marriages. Thus we have 699,000 non-Catholic persons marrying during the period averaging annually 174,750.

The "non-Catholic marrying rate" would thus be 17.7, if non-Catholics married by the priest are included: 16.7 if not.

Baptisms and Births

Our computation of the Catholic birth rate is based upon the assumption that we can derive the number of Catholic births for a given period from the number of infant baptisms for that period. Is this assumption valid? Can we make an equation between "infant baptisms" and "Catholic births"?

The idea of utilizing baptismal registers as a basis for calculating the Catholic birth rate is not a novel one. Among others, the distinguished American demographer, Robert R. Kuczynski, has employed this method in his book "Birth Registration and Birth Statistics in Canada". He believes that even in the seventeenth century, "Catholic baptisms represented practically all live white births" among the Catholic population.

Some allowance should perhaps be made for pre-baptismal mortality. Since about 2% of infants born alive do not survive the first month of their independent existence. No allowance has been made for this factor, and thus the number of infant baptisms must be taken as the minimum number of live infants born to couples married by the Catholic priest.

Since we are obtaining the number of non-Catholic births by subtracting the Catholic figure from the total births in the state, any underestimation of the Catholic figure will of course entail a slight overestimation of the number of infants born to non-Catholic parents. Thus the number we are assigning to the non-



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Catholic group must always be taken as the maximum, in addition, one must allow for the difference in very large.

Little importance can be attached to the fact that we are considering an Catholic "births" from Jan. 1, 1942 to Dec. 31, 1946, the infants who were "baptized" during this period. Actually, of course, three children were born on Dec. 31, 1942 to Dec. 31, 1946. This leaves a remainder of 374,000, which may be classed as non-Catholic baptisms; the average annual number and rate were therefore 33,500 and 8.5%. The state as a whole shows this period a birth rate of 11.2%.

Birth Rates

During the war years we were comparatively "baptized" for births, the non-Catholic rate of natural increase in so short a time is reflected in the birth rate. For the decade, 1930-1940, the state birth rate was 13.2%, while the death rate was 10.2%, the net result was 3.0%. During the war years, the non-Catholic birth rate rose from 11.2% to 12.2%.

We begin by investigating the post-war trend in Monroe County. We investigated the birth and death records from the 1940 Census publication found in this county. We find that the death rate was 11.2% in 1940, and a birth rate of 12.2%.

Births in the latter period (1942-1946) would have been 33.5% above the 1940-1946 base; Catholic births would have risen only 1.1%. This means that the percentage increase in the Catholic group is less than the percentage increase in the non-Catholic group.

The table shows that the Catholic population had 51.5% of the births, but only 33.5% of the deaths. The non-Catholic wife, 48.5% had a majority of births over deaths only 10.1%; part of this may be a more stabilized family, due to the fact that married women are more permanent members of the church than are single women.

Here again, therefore, we have a factor which requires us to say that the number we are assigning to the Catholic "births" must be taken as a minimum, whereas the number we are assigning to the non-Catholic births must be accepted as maximum.

Birth Rates

We are now in a position to answer the principal question posed at the beginning of this article: "How does the recent Catholic birth rate compare with the non-Catholic?"

During the entire fifteen-year span, 1942-1946, there were 1,082,000 children born in this state. Of these, 51.5% (548,000) were baptized as Catholics. For Catholics, the average annual number was 116,000; the average annual rate was 13.2%. All figures for the state and annually, on the average, 144,000 births with a rate of 14.8%. For completeness, we might observe that the highest average rate in the whole state over a fourteen-year period was 13.4 in 1918-1919; for the state as a whole, the lowest fourteen-year average was 12.0 in 1900-1901.

If we were to take a lower population estimate for the Catholic group, this would make the Catholic birth rate even higher, and proportionately lower the rate for non-Catholics. There is already a gap of nearly eleven points between them. We cannot reasonably accept a greater divergence, and so we cannot admit that the Catholic population of the state was less than the number assigned. In the section on "Death Rates" we have already given the reason why we cannot accept any greater population figure for the Catholic body.

Natural Increase

The rate of natural increase is found by subtracting the death rate from the birth rate. Thus for Catholics, this rate would be 13.2%. Were this rate to be continued for a decade (which, of course, it will not), it would produce a population gain from natural factors of over 12%.

The natural increase rate for all the non-Catholic population in the state would be 12.2%. For the non-Catholic group this would be 11.1%. The difference between the two groups is 1.1%.

In 1940, the non-Catholic birth rate was 12.2% of the total in 1940-1946, but only 11.2% of the total in 1942-1946.

Size of Families

The "birth rate per thousand of total population" is commonly called the "crude birth rate," because it reflects the relatively high rate of non-Catholics in the state in these previous years. We have statewide data only for the years 1942-1946; this information would never indicate an affirmative answer.

The figures made available by the researcher of two young Catholic University sociologists make it possible to show that, for this twelve-year period, Catholics had 33.5% births out of a state total of 325,700, and 32,000 deaths out of the state total of 300,000. Thus the non-Catholic total would be 718,000 births, and 319,000 deaths, an estimated decrease of 5,000 for the five years.

The total state population for the middle of the period, Jan. 1, 1946, may be closely estimated at 13,457,000. If the Catholic body has been growing at the

rate of 3.0% annually, in five years there would have been an additional 405,000 of the state to add. The lower the birth rate, the smaller the increase. At the end of 1946, the Catholic number would have been 111 for births and 112 for deaths.

A religious group can grow at different rates by three factors: the spiritual migration of converts and apostates. The Catholic birth rate in this decade has been between 2 and 2.2. This accounts in raising our birth rate by that many points. What the apostasy rate has been, is not so determinate. It would not seem to be at the present time very large.

A brief summary of all the comparative vital statistics available from the 1940 Census is given in Table I.

Pre-War Trends

During the war years we were comparatively "baptized" for births, the non-Catholic rate of natural increase in so short a time is reflected in the birth rate. For the decade, 1930-1940, the state birth rate was 13.2%, while the death rate was 10.2%, the net result was 3.0%.

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