



Since the 1966-67 peak year, seminary enrollments dropped dramatically over the next decade. Since then they have declined more slowly and now seem to be remaining stable, but at a level slightly more than one-quarter of what they were at the peak. (NC Graph)

'Priestless Sundays' Prompt Worry Over Change in Sacramental System

Last in a 3-Part Series
By Jerry Filteau
NC News Service

The shortage of priests has already led to significant changes in Catholic life in the United States. What has happened so far seems to be just the tip of the iceberg. Already changes in emphasis and focus of priestly ministry have subtly changed the way Catholics understand the priest's role. As the shortage grows, these changes are likely to become considerably more pronounced and evident.

To the extent that the shortage has helped precipitate greater involvement of lay people in the life of the Church and helped foster lay ministries, many Church observers consider it a healthy phenomenon.

But they also see serious danger signs, particularly in three areas — exhaustion of priests, reduction of their ministry to administering the sacraments, and a weakening of the Church's sacramental nature.

Father Peter Clarke, pastor of two rural parishes and a mission in the Diocese of Charleston, S.C., who recently moderated a regional meeting on the priest shortage, said, "Many, many priests are overworked."

"This leads to exhaustion and many are leaving the ministry after 20 years," he added.

"Many are just saying too many Masses, and this causes a person to be so tired that he doesn't spend enough time in quiet prayer. You need quiet prayer, prayer where you're not being called on to be the leader of prayer."

Archbishop John F. Whealon of Hartford, Conn., recently ordered parishes in his archdiocese to reduce their weekend Mass schedules — in part because priests celebrating too many Masses cannot give to each one the time and energy needed to make it a vital, meaningful celebration.

The shortage has not yet reached the point where people are regularly without Mass on Sunday, said Church officials across the country who were contacted by NC News.

"But we'll see it down the road for sure," said Bishop Michael McAuliffe of Jefferson City, Mo.

The prospect of not enough priests to provide regular access to the sacraments frightens those who see the Church losing its sacramental life.

Father Clarke said, "Lay ministries are fine, but we can be seeing a change from a sacramental Church to a Church of the word... I'm afraid that all this is happening in an unreflected way."

A loss of Catholic "understanding of the Church as a sacramental Church" because of the priest shortage is a growing fear of priests across the country, said Father Richard Hynes, director of programming for the National Federation of Priest's Councils.

But related to that fear, he said, is another dimension of the problem: As ever fewer priests devote ever more of their time to serving the sacramental needs of a growing Catholic population, the notion — or at least the practice — of priestly ministry becomes restricted.

The celebration of the sacraments becomes more "impersonal," Father Hynes said, when a priest is called in to celebrate a wedding but has not participated in the couple's marriage preparation, or when he baptizes but did not help the family prepare for the baptism.

Bishop McAuliffe suggested the same thing when he said the danger the Church faces from the priest shortage is "not just a Sunday situation" of lack of access to Mass or the sacraments. "It's what happens when the people are left without leadership," he said.

While nearly everyone acknowledges that the U.S. Church needs more priests, the question is, where will they come from? Researchers say more in-depth studies of the causes underlying the vocations crisis are needed in order to tackle the issue effectively.

Research that is available indicates that the reality is complex. Much of this research was summarized in a study by three Catholic University of America sociologists, which is being published this spring by the U.S. Catholic Conference.

The authors said research so far was too meager to establish positively the causes of the vocations crisis, but they could rule out some myths and indicate some directions.

One myth they ruled out is the idea the "young people (in the United States) aren't as religious as they once were." Continued growth over the past two decades in mainline Protestant seminaries, whose enrollees come from essentially the same mainstream of American culture as Catholics, indicates that the dramatic decline in Catholic vocations is not due to general cultural changes in America, they said.

"It must be due to certain recent changes within the Catholic subculture or differences in institutional rules between the Catholic Church and the Protestant denominations," they said.

The Catholic University researchers offered two main areas in which they said that recent changes in the Catholic subculture seemed to exhibit substantial differences that might have an impact on vocations.

One was the substantial assimilation of Catholics into the mainstream of American culture today. The argument here is that upward social mobility, suburbanization, increased education and professional career opportunities, abandonment or decreased importance of traditional ethnic neighborhoods and social ties have all contributed to a weakening of forces that traditionally influenced young Catholics to be attracted to the priesthood or Religious life.

While these factors appear to have played a significant role in the decline of vocations, the sociologists noted that they are "strong external factors" over which the Church has no real control.

Another subcultural factor cited by the Catholic University sociologists was the fact of theological and doctrinal confusion about the priesthood in the Church since the Second Vatican Council.

Despite a lack of empirical research on the question, they said that it seems "plausible" that this confusion has contributed to the vocations crisis.

The researchers tried to analyze "differences in institutional rules between the Catholic and Protestant denominations" to see whether there are certain Catholic rules which might help explain the decline in Catholic vocations while Protestant vocations were going up in the past two decades.

They noted that Protestants differ from Catholics in the three areas most often cited as possible reasons for the Catholic vocations crisis: lifelong commitment, celibacy, and admission of women priests.

Episcopal and Lutheran clergy are free to move out of active ministry without social stigma or change in their ordained status, they said. According to a 1980 study, among reasons Catholic young men gave for not becoming priests, "the third most frequently mentioned reason was the requirement of lifelong commitment."

One of the "two most mentioned problems," they said, was the Church's requirement of celibacy. They noted that Protestant churches allow married clergy and most leaders of those churches consider married clergy more effective.

A Gallup poll last year found that 58 percent of U.S. Catholics surveyed supported the idea of married priests and only 33 percent opposed, with the rest undecided.

The researchers noted that U.S. Catholic support for women priests has grown substantially in recent years — from 29 percent in 1974 to 44 percent in 1982, according to Gallup polls.

But they also pointed out that the admission of women priests in the Episcopal and Lutheran churches has not yet resulted in a substantial number of women in "active pastoral ministry."

Strong traditions of "preferring men ministers" have

Lay People Coming To the Rescue

By Jerry Filteau
NC News Service

The growing shortage of priests in the United States has been accompanied by a real boom in lay persons engaged in pastoral ministries.

- Permanent deacons, non-existent 15 years ago, now number more than 6,000, or one for every three parishes in the country. On average they spend 14 hours a week in diaconal ministry. Though ordained and part of the Church's clergy, they exercise a kind of ministry quite distinct from that of priests.

- There are now more than 5,000 fulltime, professional parish religious education coordinators, less than 1 percent of them priests.

- The lay director of youth ministry, often as a fulltime, salaried parish position, is a relatively new but rapidly growing phenomenon.

- The number of lay professionals in central diocesan offices has been growing rapidly.

- More and more laypersons are replacing priests and nuns as administrators of Catholic schools and hospitals.

- The number of lay teachers in Catholic schools has increased more than 40 percent, from 90,000 in 1968-69 to 127,000 in 1983-84. While many are replacing nuns, the reason is not only the decline in the number of women Religious in the country, many nuns who have left teaching posts have done so to take up parish ministries or other special pastoral ministries. In Church terms, the ministries of nuns, who are not ordained, are lay ministries.

- Through parish councils and committees, parish members have taken up many planning, coordinating and administrative tasks that were normally handled by priests in the past.

- No one knows how many lay ministers of the Eucharist are active across the country, but it may well run into the hundreds of thousands. The Chicago archdiocese alone has 12,000 ministers of the Eucharist, 4,000 of them specially trained to minister to the ill, the elderly and shut-ins. The Boston archdiocese has about 10,000, a liturgist there estimated.

- Eucharistic ministers at Mass and other lay contributors to the liturgical celebration — musicians, singers, song leaders, readers, bearers of the offertory gifts — do not reduce the need for priests or the work of the priest as such, but they make the liturgical celebration far richer than the priest-celebrant could by himself.

- In addition, eucharistic ministers trained to work with the sick and elderly not only make Communion available to those people but greatly expand the Church's ministry of personal pastoral care to them.

- Parish renewal programs going on in many dioceses are credited with intensifying lay involvement in everything from liturgical participation to evangelization to ministries of care for the sick, elderly, poor, homeless, hungry and imprisoned.

- For marriage preparation and marriage and family life ministry, diocesan and parish programs draw extensively on lay professional and volunteer services. A number of dioceses have instituted or are developing couple-to-couple programs in which experienced couples provide a ministry of counsel and support to new couples. Some long-standing lay activities are now more clearly being seen as forms of ministry in and for the Church. For example, parish programs involving parents in preparing their children to receive the sacraments have sought to make parents more conscious that this is part of the special ministry toward their own children.

limited women's "opportunities for paid ministry" in the Episcopal and Lutheran churches, they said.

"Whether or not the same attitude exists in the Catholic community is unclear," they added. "The undersupply of priests may provide a greater receptivity of women priests among Catholics."

Statistics are not available on how many U.S. Catholic priests favor the addition of women or of married men to their ranks, but "both theologically and experientially, on the pastoral level," many priests have come to question whether ordinations should be "limited to celibate males," said Father Hynes.

The Church will admit women priests within five years and married priests before that, Father Clarke predicted.

Father James Parker, archdiocesan vicar for worship and ministries in Portland, Ore., said that the shortage will not be reversed without changes in the institutional rules.

As the shortage reaches the point where people do not have a priest for Mass on Sunday, he said, "they're going to demand that the (lay) leader be ordained" because the substitution of a liturgy of the word for the eucharistic celebration "betrays the deepest instinct of the ordinary Catholic."

In overseeing the selection and development of part-time and full-time lay ministers in the Portland Archdiocese, Father Parker said, his strategy is to seek out and place in parish jobs "the people that we would want to be priests in the year 2000."

Officially, however, the Church resists the idea that a change in institutional rules is needed or possible.

Archbishop Pio Laghi, newly named papal pronuncio to the United States, said in a recent interview, that the Church stands against married priests or women priests are not simply the views "of this pope" but unchanging positions of the Church.

The question of women priests is a doctrinal matter of "the will of Christ for His Church," he said. The discipline of celibacy, while admittedly not a matter of doctrine, "is a treasury" that the Church will not give up, he said.