

Even large ordination increase will not suffice

By Carl Eifert
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Increasing the rate of priesthood ordinations by even 25 percent will not reverse the declining number of priests, according to a study prepared for the U.S. bishops.

The 163-page study, entitled "The Catholic Priest in the U.S.: Demographic Investigations," was done by a sociologist and researchers at the University of Wisconsin and a researcher at Brigham Young University in Utah.

A copy was provided to Catholic News Service by the U.S. Catholic Conference.

Bishop Donald W. Wuerl of Pittsburgh, chairman of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry, told CNS that he and the chairmen of two other NCCB committees would study the material and make recommendations to the NCCB Administrative Committee when it meets Sept. 11-13 in Washington. The Administrative Committee makes policy for the bishops between NCCB general meetings.

Richard A. Schoenherr, the study's principal investigator and a former Detroit archdiocesan priest, said in a July 3 statement that, in his view, unless the church reverses its stand against married clergy the decline in priests will continue.

The study, however, makes no suggestions for increasing the number of diocesan priests and bases its numerical projections on the assumption that the priesthood will remain celibate.

Foundation reports 1990 earnings up

ELMIRA — The St. Joseph's Hospital Foundation, the hospital's fundraising arm, reported July 19 that contributions for the first half of 1990 are up 34.6 percent over the same period in 1989.

Through June 30, 1990, the foundation reported contributions of \$62,075.65, as compared to \$40,602.31 for the first half of 1989.

David P. Sullivan, executive director of the foundation, attributed the increase in donations to several factors.

"We are working to make people better aware of the foundation through television commercials, direct mail and plain old word-of-mouth," Sullivan said.

Established in 1984, the St. Joseph's Hospital Foundation raises funds to support programs and services at the hospital. Contributions come through planned gifts, memorials, grants and special events.

Bishop Wuerl also noted that it was confined to statistical analysis of data gathered from 86 U.S. dioceses that cooperated during the six-year project.

Father Eugene Hemrick, the research director for the bishops' conference who was involved in originating the study and who is listed in the report as a consultant, disagreed with Schoenherr's conclusion on celibacy.

"Maybe God is telling us we had too many priests in the past," Father Hemrick told CNS. "Perhaps this is the work of the Holy Spirit telling us to work closer with the laity."

Schoenherr's study, co-written by Lawrence A. Young from Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, was funded by the Lilly Endowment.

"The data reveal that the decrease in priestly ordinations is the most significant factor in the overall clergy decline — far more significant than resignations, retirements or other factors," the study said.

"But analysis showed that if priestly ordinations were to be increased by 25 percent (other conditions remaining the same), the moderate decline in the number of U.S. diocesan priests between 1966 and 2005 would still stand at about 34 percent," rather than the 40 percent drop projected for that period, it said.

An overall finding of the study shows that for the 40-year period from 1966 to 2005 the number of active diocesan priests in the United States will have dropped by 40 percent while the number of Catholics will have increased between 24 percent and 38 percent.

There were 35,000 active diocesan priests in 1966, and the study found that number would fall to about 21,000 in 2005, almost half of which will be older than 55 and only one-eighth 34 or younger.

The study used actual figures for 1966-84 and projected those trends for 1985-2005. The projections were tested, the study said, by gathering actual data from 12 dioceses from Jan. 1, 1985, through Jan. 1, 1989, and found its moderate assumption off by a factor of 2 percentage points.

"A growing majority of priests themselves and the Catholic people say they would welcome a married priest," said Schoenherr, who was ordained in 1960, left the priesthood in 1970, and later married.

"The problem is that the Catholic Church is based on a tradition of sacramental piety — the Mass and the sacraments — and people are beginning to complain that this is being lost," Schoenherr said.

Schoenherr was in Spain and not available for further comment. He is doing a similar study of the Spanish clergy.

Father Hemrick said the study raised more questions than it answered, such as why a "lot of parents don't encourage their kids to go into religious life."

Father Hemrick said the church was responding to the declining number of priests with one-priest parishes, permanent deacons, and with "100 new lay ministry training centers."

Bishop Wuerl told CNS July 13 that "once you have the raw data in front of you, you can address it and try to draw some conclusions. I have not attempted to do that."

In the period covered by the study, the bishop said, the Diocese of Pittsburgh — one of the 86 studied — had "witnessed the fruit of the implementation of the Second Vatican Council, which includes the involvement and the appreciation of the gifts and talents of countless laypeople."

"We have also witnessed the functioning of the permanent diaconate. The result has been that in parishes where we used to have three priests," the bishop said, "we find we can provide the same service with two."

In that period "we witnessed an increase in the vitality in the church across the board," Bishop Wuerl said.

Other NCCB committee chairmen involved in studying the report, he said, were Bishop James P. Keleher of Belleville, Ill., of the Committee on Priestly Formation, and Bishop Elden F. Curtiss of Helena, Mont., of the Committee on Vocations.

Among the major findings of the study:

- Eastern, North Central and New England states will have lost half of their 1966 number of active priests by 2005; the West North Central and Middle Atlantic states over 45 percent, and dioceses in the Western, South Central, South Atlantic and the East South Central states 15-25 percent.

- If the trend continues, the overall decline would produce 69 percent fewer priests in the mid-1990s than three decades earlier.

- The cumulative loss of priests through resignation from 1966 through 1984 was almost 20 percent.

- By 2005, about 20 percent of priests will be retired, sick or on leave. The comparable figure for 1966 was 3.4 percent.

- Young men seem more attracted to ordination in dioceses where the shortage is the greatest.

- The laity-to-priest ratio will double from 1,100 Catholics per priest in 1975, a suggested benchmark, to 2,200 in 2005, which does not take into account the rapid growth in the Hispanic population.


- The average age of newly ordained priests increased from 27.2 years in 1966 to 31.5 years in 1984, reducing the length of the average career from 42.8 years to 38.5 years. Statistically, the ordination of two 48-year-old priests is the equivalent of ordaining one 26-year-old in terms of years of service.

- Numbers of religious-order priests are projected to decline about 35 percent from 20,000 in 1975 to under 13,000 in 2005.

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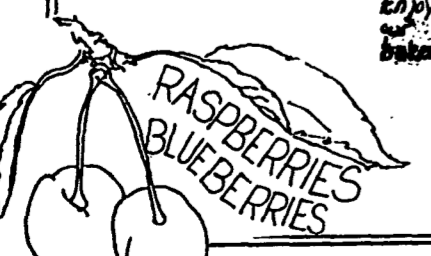
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