

CHANGING PARISH DEMOGRAPHICS

Catholic Population

The Catholic Church in the United States has shown relatively steady growth in total population over the last century—approximately 2 to 4% per year for the first half of the 20th century, and slowing to 1 to 2% in the second half.

Between 1900 & 1950—Catholics grew from just over 10 million to just under 30 million, an increase of 165%.

Between 1950 & 2000—the Catholic population more than doubled again, increasing 109% during that period.

Number of Priests

By contrast, the total number of priests grew rapidly in the first half of the century, averaging about 2% per year, but stopped growing in 1969, and declined through the remainder of the century.

In 1900—there was one priest for every 899 Catholics in the United States.

By 1942—at its peak, there was one priest for every 617 Catholics.

By 2000—there was one priest for every 1,342 Catholics.

Number of Parishes

During the period of greatest growth—in the first half of the 20th century—new parishes were erected at a rate that kept up with the growth in Catholic population, so that the average number of Catholics per parish was nearly the same in 1950 as it had been in 1900 (1,843 people per parish in 1950 vs. 1,759 per parish in 1900).

In the second half of the 20th century, Catholic growth outpaced parish construction so that by the year 2000, the number of Catholics per parish had reached 3,112, close to double what it had been in 1950. And, since 1995, the total number of parishes has declined each year as fewer new parishes are erected and more dioceses engage in merging or closing parishes due to shifting demographics and fewer priests.

Trends

- Today, 83% of parishes have a resident pastor. In 60% of these, he is the only priest.

- Close to one in five parishes now have no resident pastor. Most of these are administered by a non-resident priest who has responsibility for more than one parish in a clustered or linked parish structure.
- About 18% of the parishes with no resident priest as pastor are entrusted to someone other than a priest.
- Adult Catholics in the United States today are almost evenly divided between those born before Vatican II and those born since the Council. Half of all adult Catholics today have no living memory of the Church before Vatican II.
- Significant for the future of parish life is the increasing racial, ethnic and cultural diversity found among younger Catholics today. Nearly 90% of pre-Vatican II Catholics are white, non-Hispanic; about 85% of Vatican II Catholics are white, non-Hispanic. However, because much of Catholic growth in the latter part of the 20th century has been through immigration from around the world, Post-Vatican II Catholics are increasingly diverse. Only about half of all Catholics between the ages of 18 and 24 are white, non-Hispanic.
- Not only are the demographics different for younger Catholics. So is their connection to the church. 60% of the generation born before 1965 say they attend Mass weekly or bi-weekly. Only about 20% of Catholics in their twenties and thirties do. They are less likely to attend Mass out of habit, social pressure, or fear. They still identify strongly as Catholics but their attachment to the church is different than for the generations before them.

From paper presented by Mary Gautier, Senior Researcher, CARA—Center for Applied Research for the Apostolate, Georgetown University, Washington DC (2008)