

Causes for the Priest Shortage

One of the most pressing problems facing the Roman Catholic Church today is the intensifying worldwide priest shortage that has contributed to the closure and consolidation of thousands of churches and has made the Eucharist less available to millions of Catholics. Problems cannot be solved by treating symptoms, but require correct diagnosis and effective therapy. In order to solve the problem of a shortage of priests, it is necessary to identify the real causes prior to recommending effective long-term solutions.

Lower fertility rates

The first cause for the priest shortage is the decline in the Catholic fertility rate. While fertility rates have decreased in the United States and Europe, they are much higher in developing nations. In light of this development, it is no wonder that African countries like Nigeria with high fertility rates are exporting seminarians and priests to Europe, the United States and other countries with much lower birth rates.

With U.S. women giving birth to 1.779 (2020) children in a lifetime, parents are far less inclined today to encourage a son to become a priest and perhaps lose the possibility of ever becoming grandparents. However, in countries like the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where women average 5.96 births in a lifetime, one could expect parents to be more supportive of a son or daughter who expresses interest in becoming a priest or a nun.

In European countries like Poland, with a fertility rate of currently 1.458 (2022), its current population of approximately 38 million is expected to decline to approximately 32 million by 2050. In contrast, with a birth rate of 5.2, Nigeria's population of over 206.1 million (2020) is expected to grow to over 411 million by 2050. If one were investing in vocations and had insider information on fertility rates, one would be inclined to invest more in countries like Nigeria than in areas like Europe and the United States.

Economic development

A second cause for the priest shortage involves economics. Vocation rates are generally inversely proportional to economic development that also has a natural affect upon reducing population growth. Economic development allows for a broader variety of vocational choices. Numerous job opportunities in developed nations afford Catholic young men job options denied to those in developing countries. Developing countries with fewer vocational opportunities make the priesthood attractive when one considers the limited alternatives.

As Catholics become more financially prosperous, vocational opportunities and choices that were previously beyond the reach of working-class Catholic families are now more available. Hence, it follows that the number of seminarians are decreasing in countries like Poland that are experiencing economic growth. The number of young men entering Polish seminaries over the past ten years has fallen by 40 percent (Mazurczak).

There are parallels that can be drawn between military recruitment of young men from financially disadvantaged backgrounds and promoting vocations to the priesthood as both the Church and the military offer opportunities for a better life. In an effort to provide active duty personnel and their families with sufficient numbers of doctors, the military offers medical scholarships to college graduates providing them with a medical school education on the condition that they serve for seven years on active duty. So too has the Catholic Church offered similar educational incentives to young men on the condition that they serve as priests. There are, however, two major differences between the two programs: 1) The period of service in the military is usually for a set number of years vice a lifetime in the priesthood; and 2) Service as a medical officer does not require the vow of celibacy.

For many years the percentage of Catholics in the military was disproportionately high, particularly in the U.S. Marine Corps. However, the percentage of Catholics in the U.S. military has declined in recent years as Catholics in society are enjoying more economic, social and professional success. As Catholic families in the United States become more affluent and other vocational opportunities become available, interest both in the military and in the priesthood may continue to decline.

Decline in participation at Mass

A third cause for the decrease in seminarians and priests is the decline in Mass attendance that has occurred over the past three decades. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, nearly 75 percent of U.S. Catholics attended Mass each week. By the mid-1950s, attendance dropped to its 1939 pre-war level of approximately 65 percent. In the period surrounding Vatican II (1962-65), attendance began to decline not only in the United States, but to greater or lesser degrees in other countries.

The percentage of Catholics attending Mass today is considerably lower than it was in the late '50s and '60s when the number of ordinations to the priesthood was higher than at any other period in the history of the United States. While a Gallup Survey estimated U.S. Catholic Sunday Mass attendance at 48 percent in 1970, a CARA Catholic Poll (CCP) taken in 2019 revealed that only 21 percent of U.S. Catholics said they attended Mass once a week or more.

In light of the number of Catholic families who have suffered the pain of divorce over the past decades, a number of young people are growing up in homes where they do not worship with their fathers and mothers in church on Sunday mornings. The less young people attend Mass and have contact with priests, the lower the probability is they will think about the possibility of becoming priests and celebrating the Eucharist themselves.

Lack of parental support

A fourth cause to consider is the lack of support on the part of parents. In the United States, 83 percent of seminarians received encouragement from their families in 1966 to pursue a vocation to the priesthood. When U.S. Catholic parents were surveyed in 2000 to determine if they would encourage their children to become a priest or nun, 25 percent said they would support such a decision; 48 percent responded they would not offer encouragement; 19 percent were strongly opposed; and only 8 percent were strongly supportive (Study of the impact).

In a 1995 luncheon talk to the Catholic Press Association, Father Norman Rotert, a priest for 42 years, remarked: "Women are the ones who identify and nurture vocations, and they are not doing it anymore, and they are not going to do it, and all the preaching in the world is not going to change their minds. If you don't believe me, talk to them. One will tell you, 'I know my son has a vocation to the priesthood, but he won't accept celibacy.' Another will say, 'A church that won't accept my daughters isn't going to get a son.'" With fewer Catholic parents in favor of their children pursuing a religious vocation, it should not come as a surprise that young Catholics are pursuing other career choices (McBrien 8).

In November of 2000, Brooklyn Bishop Thomas Daily wrote a pastoral letter promoting vocations that prompted *New York Times* reporter, Laurie Goldstein, to write a feature story entitled, "No Longer Eager to Say, My Son, the Priest." Goodstein's article began, "In generations past, when Roman Catholic families were large and devout, behind almost every Catholic priest was a Catholic mother who had encouraged one of her children to commit his life to a career in the service of God." The article referenced surveys and provided quotes from

interviews undertaken by Goldstein showing that many devout Catholic parents no longer encourage their children to consider vocations to the priesthood or religious life. (Rodimer).

If a son in his late 20s or 30s does not manifest any interest whatsoever in women or dating, his parents are more inclined to endorse his wish to become a priest to avoid answering questions as to why their son does not seem interested in marriage. While it is unfair to assume that a person is a homosexual who is not interested in dating or marriage, there are Catholic parents of homosexual children who are more supportive of a son becoming a priest than many parents of heterosexual children.

Lack of priest encouragement

A fifth cause for the priest shortage, one that is often not mentioned, is the lack of encouragement from priests themselves. Twenty-five years ago, a newly ordained priest in many dioceses served for a number of years as an associate pastor. Later he served alone at smaller parishes only to return to pastor a larger church aided generally by one or more associates. If he stayed on until he reached the mandatory retirement age of 75, it was because he could count on his associates to carry the bulk of the workload. Today, most priests do not have parochial vicars to help them when they are older. More frequently today they find themselves “home alone” pastoring large congregations or even multiple parishes. It is no wonder then that more and more priests are seeking to retire in their 60s rather than dropping dead before they reach mandatory retirement ages of 70 or 75. Given the problems of stress, loneliness and physical exhaustion that priests face today, it is not surprising that some priests are hesitant to encourage young men to enter the priesthood.

Sexual awareness and positive view of sexuality

A sixth factor to consider that is contributing to a decrease in priestly vocations is the lower age at which people begin to engage in sexual activity. The vast majority of priests, who were ordained during the '50s, '60s and early '70s, when the ordination classes were much larger than they are today, entered seminaries without sexual experience. A number of them entered high school seminaries, while the majority began their seminary formation in college. The Church recognized that recruiting for the celibate priesthood was an easier task if the young men did not fully realize what they were forgoing not only sexually, but also in terms of companionship and the joys of fatherhood.

The proportion of young people who are sexually experienced has increased steadily since the 1960s. The median age of first premarital sex in 1963 was 20 compared to 15.6 in 2018. Not surprisingly, as more young Catholic men have become sexually active at an earlier age, the number of them who are willing to live without the sexual intimacy involved in married life has decreased. With the advent of the Internet, despite parental controls, young people are learning more about sex at an earlier age even if they are not engaging in it.

The combination of earlier sexual awareness coupled with a more positive interpretation of God's gift of sexuality in marriage is probably not the most important factor in reducing the number of young men willing to commit themselves to a celibate priesthood. However, viewed in conjunction with the other causes already identified, these developments certainly cannot be overlooked. Young people view sexual intimacy as normal and wholesome while the benefits of celibacy are rarely if ever extolled in American culture.

Increase in homosexual seminarians, priests, and bishops

One of the most controversial causes for the priest shortage is the growing percentage of homosexuals in seminaries, the presbyterate, and the episcopacy. A 2012 psychological study of “actively ministering or retired priests” in the U.S. revealed that only 26.9% of the

priests identified themselves as heterosexuals; 67.3% self-identified as gay/homosexual; and 5.8% reported that they were bisexual (Kappler). This study, viewed in relation to previous studies, shows how the percentage of gay clergy has risen considerably over the past decades.

Such estimates are supported by statements that surface from time to time in defense of the ordination of homosexual candidates. In a letter to the editor of *The Catholic Messenger* of the Davenport Diocese, a Redemptorist Brother wrote, "At the end of one recent year everyone approved for vows was gay" (The Wrong Issue). Whatever the number, the percentage of gay seminarians, priests, and bishops is much higher than Church leaders would like to admit.

Even though Pope Francis declared that individuals with "deep seated tendencies" or who practice "homosexual acts" should not be ordained, studies show that more than half the bishops and priests in the United States have a homosexual orientation which has impacted the recruitment and retention of heterosexual seminarians and priests who do not want to be identified as belonging to a predominantly homosexual group (Harris).

Bishops, particularly those with a homosexual orientation, need to examine the impact their recruiting policies continue to have on the recruitment and retention of heterosexual seminarians and priests. How many heterosexual seminarians were either coerced into leaving the seminary or abandoned their interest in the priesthood because of the presence of significant numbers of gays in seminaries and among the local clergy? While most of the thousands of priests who have left the priesthood did so to marry, will more choose this path if the percentage of heterosexually oriented clergy continues to decrease?

Sexual Abuse Crisis

The sexual abuse crisis, particularly in the United States, Ireland, and Germany, has not only had a negative impact on Sunday Mass attendance, but it has also seriously damaged the image of priests. When a young man or woman appears in public wearing a Marine Corps dress blue uniform, he or she often does so with a great sense of personal pride. Unfortunately, the abuse perpetrated by more than 10 percent of priests and covered up by many bishops has robbed priests today of any pride they might have in wearing their roman collars in public and being identified as Catholic priests.

Father Basil Hutsko of St. Michael's Byzantine Catholic Church in Merrillville, Indiana was badly beaten on 20 August 2018 by an attacker who, before rendering him unconscious, said, "This is for all the kids." In so far as Father Hutsko had never harmed anyone and was described as a "very dedicated and hardworking priest in good standing," the FBI investigated the attack as a hate crime (Bigos).

The strict protocols put into place in Dallas by the U.S. Bishops in 2002 provide protection for children from predator priests, but they also have had unintentional consequences for healthy priests and children. Prior to the sex abuse crisis, a young, healthy priest whose college classmates were marrying and having children could take kids from his parish out to a local eatery or on camping trips without lay supervision. The priest found fulfillment in loving and mentoring the kids as if they were his own children, while the young people sometimes shared concerns that they might have been hesitant to share with their own parents. There were also kids on those outings from broken homes who may not have had a dad to talk with about girls, sex, alcohol, drugs, or any number of issues. Today, with a lay parishioner always present in the mix, kids can't speak confidentially with a priest like they could in the past. Hence, both priests and young people are deprived of interacting experiences which might help them both to meet their basic human need to love and be loved. If a young priest cannot experience love in a healthy interactive manner with young people in his parish, might he be moved to leave the priesthood and marry to have children of his own?

Ecclesiastically mandated celibacy

One of the most discussed causes for the priest shortage is the obligation of celibacy, a sacrifice not mandated by Christ or deemed absolutely necessary by most laity and clergy. The late Dean Hoge of the Life Cycle Institute of The Catholic University of America conducted an extensive study in which he concluded there would be a fourfold increase in seminary applications if celibacy were no longer required (Experts).

While celibacy is only one of a number of causes for the current decline in seminarians and priests, it has always been the major reason that there are more than four times as many Protestant ministers as there are Catholic priests caring for equal numbers of faithful. The increase in applicants for the priesthood projected by Hoge could be greater or less depending upon the family income that married priests would be offered. Just as the number of military recruits declines when the economy is strong, so too have the numbers of married Protestant clergy declined when other more lucrative careers became available to compete with pastoring a church in which the pay is often modest and the hours are long.

Celibacy is a major reason that priests give for leaving the priesthood. Most Catholics personally know some very dedicated and inspiring priests who have left active ministry to marry. Given the fact that priestly celibacy is a church discipline that Jesus himself did not require, some people would like to see married priests offered the opportunity to return to active ministry. Approximately 72.4 percent of Catholics say the church should allow priests to get married (Saint Leo University), while 59 percent believe women should be permitted to be ordained priests (Expectations).

When the church ran out of nuns to staff its parochial schools in the United States, it had the choice of closing the schools or hiring qualified lay teachers. Likewise, the church must decide to either close more and more of its parishes or staff them with qualified alternatives to celibate men. As priestless parishes multiply and lay-led worship services replace the celebration of Mass, such a response to the priest shortage is compromising the Church's Eucharistic character. From the historical perspective, Sunday celebrations conducted by lay persons or deacons is a far more radical development than the restoration of married priests (Gomulka). In light of the current "graying and gaying" of the priesthood in many dioceses, as well as the growing number of priestless parishes, those opposed to restoring the option of priests to marry need to consider what is more important: the Eucharist or celibacy?

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