

CARA NEWS. . .

Some new statistics were published by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) concerning the Catholic Church in America. Very interesting stuff too. In the year 1965, the Catholic priest, sister, and brother populations peaked. In 1965, there were 59,426 priests in the USA. CARA noted after World War II, seminaries and ordinations were at an all-time high, but after the conclusion of Vatican II, those numbers went into dramatic decline; they speculate that the cause was a change in the idea of the nature of the priesthood and the Church. By 2022, the last year statistics were available, there were 34,344 priests in the USA. In 1965, of the 59,426 priests, only 36,467 were diocesan priests. By 2022, that number declined to 24,110 diocesan priests. However, of the 24,110 diocesan priests, only 15,912 were active in ministry; the rest were retired or sick. In 2022, there were 16,439 parishes served by 15,912 diocesan priests, so almost parity, however, those parishes spanned across the whole nation, and the priests were clustered in regions or cities. So, there wasn't one priest in each parish.

More dramatic was the decline in religious women, we call sisters or nuns. In 1965, there were 178,740. By 2022, there were 12,096, and most of those were elderly. Religious brothers in 1965 numbered 36,321. By 2022, they dropped to 3,516, again mostly elderly.

CARA noted that if we look at statistics before the boom anomaly year of 1965 and look back to 1950, the ratio of priests to parishes was the same. Hollywood and the media often portray the Catholic Church based on the anomaly year of 1965, with stuffed rectories and convents, which was a very short-lived reality. But this Hollywood version still persists in the minds of many Americans. Parish offices hear it often when someone calls and asks if "one of the many priests could come for x, y or z". When they are told a priest cannot come to the event, they become irritated and say, "With all those priests you can't send someone?" All those priests only exist on the cinema reel! The caller has the Hollywood model stuck in their head but it is not a reality. Most of our parishes in the Diocese are one-priest parishes.

The Catholic population of the USA has remained relatively stable over the same period of time, with dips up or down. This is largely due to immigration, which CARA notes has always been the case in the USA. The Catholic population peaked in 2005 at 81.2 million Catholics, but in 2022 that number had dropped to 73.5 million. In 1990, there were 986,306 baptisms, while in 2022, there were 437,942 baptisms; this statistic tracks with the dramatic drop in births in the US.

More interesting is that today, 1 in 10 Catholics are no longer Catholic; they self-identify as being non-religious but, also add they were "Catholic" at one time. In research, they are called "the nones" since they do not affiliate with any religion. There are "nones" in all religions, but Catholic "nones", if they were a religion, would be the second largest religious body in the USA after Catholics. Interesting stuff!

While the current state of the Catholic Church is a mirror of the pre-World War II Church, most people when they think about the Catholic Church identify it with the 1965 boom year. It seems that the Church in the USA is stable; however, vocations to the priesthood are not keeping up. In our Diocese last year, 3 priests died and 5 retired (a loss of 8 priests); only one priest was ordained, so we have 7 fewer priests this year.

Peace and Good – Very Rev. John Bambrick (St. Aloysius, Jackson)