Jesuit Priest Hostage in Peru

GETTING OUT ALIVE

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PASTORAL CARE
A Review of "Nothing Sacred"

James Martin
There is certainly a gap between the numbers we had 30 years ago and the numbers today, but it is far smaller than one might first suppose.

Will We Ever Have Enough Priests?

Priestly ministry is indispensable for Catholic parish life, so having an adequate number of priests is a matter of great importance. These days, though, it is almost an article of faith that the church in the United States (and probably also in many other parts of the world) suffers from a severe shortage of priests. Stories of parish closings, empty rectories and Massless Sundays form a powerful set of accusations confirming this conclusion. It is difficult, however, to form a sound judgment about the adequacy of the "supply" of priests from the examples of a few parishes here and there, or from this or that diocese. If we are to make any kind of a national problem, we need to take a national perspective, which means that we must attend to statistical data rather than anecdotes. These data are hard to come by. There are some questions to which we might very much like to have answers but for which no reliable data are available. The best long-term source of quantitative data about the priesthood is the Office of Catholic Directory published by P. J. Kennedy and Sons, which for over 100 years has published information collected from dioceses. These data concern the numbers and distribution of clergy, religious and laity as well as various facets of church life on national, diocesan and parishal levels. They can help us to dispel a lot of fallacies about the status of priestly ministry today.

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Which Decline?

The first misconception is that the decline in the number of priests began after the Second Vatican Council, and perhaps even because of events following the council. While it is true that the absolute number of priests in the United States peaked in 1966 (at just under 60,000, compared to about 48,100 in 1956), this is not the most important figure. What counts here is not the absolute number of priests in the Catholic population. In 1956 there were about 780 Catholics per priest, as compared to 1,272 Catholics per priest today. This is certainly a decline, but it is not an examination of the data reveals that the decline began in 1952. The ratio of Catholics to priests was about 615 to one in 1941, which means that there were proportionately about twice as many priests then as there are today. For the past 35 years the proportion of priests has been steadily declining, more sharply in the last 25 years. Even if the decrease following the council accelerated this decline, it already had considerable momentum by the mid-1960s. We must look for underlying causes somewhere else.

Seminary Enrollment.

The second misconception is that there has been a disastrous decline in the number of seminarians. Once again, the data confirm this conclusion on a superficial level, but other pertinent information casts its doubts into doubt. In 1956 there were about 45,400 seminarians in the United States in about 375 seminaries. While there are only about 4,600 today in 201 seminaries, the earlier figures, however, include students enrolled under the older seminary structure, which began with the first year of high school. The majority of the 45,000 (I do not know precisely what proportion) were high school or college-level students, but the 4,600 counted today are primarily collegiate and post-collegiate students. Furthermore, the dropout rate for high school and college seminarians was enormous: some have suggested as high as 50 to 90 percent, while the dropout rate today for collegiates and post-collegiate seminarians is minimal. If we assume the same 90 percent dropout rate, then perhaps only 4,000 to 10,000 of our 1966 seminarians eventually progressed to ordination. Moreover, a significant number of these served for only a few years before leaving priestly ministry. The "decrease" of 25 years ago was more than three times what it is today.

Therefore, while we had many more seminarians 30 years ago, far fewer proceeded to ordination, and of those who were ordained, a larger number left the priesthood than do today. There is certainly a gap between the numbers we had 30 years ago and the numbers today, but it is far smaller than one might first suppose.

Ratio of Catholics to Priests.

A third misconception is that the number and proportion of priests in the United States today represents a severe and probably permanent blight on the church. Once again, the data undermine our confidence in this conclusion. If we were to graph the ratio of Catholics to priests by year through the century, we would trace a curve line like a shallow valley, dipping gradually from the left (the early years of the century), reaching a low point near the middle (about 1941) and rising a bit more sharply toward the right (the end of the century). There were certainly some fluctuations in this curve because the number of Catholics per priest in 1900 would have been nearly as much as in 1950 (about 900). In the late 1930s the proportion probably approximated what it was in 1900, but we cannot say with confidence that our data are unreliable for that period.

Alert readers will note that these numbers require further interpretation. The numbers of priests reported in the O.C.D. include those who are retired, disabled or otherwise not available for active ministry. We have no reliable way to national count of "active" priests, but we may reasonably assume that while priests 50 years ago died at a younger age, a higher proportion of priests today are inactive. The proportion of Catholics to priests is higher than one might first suppose.

The Inaugural Conference for The Center for Congregations and Family Ministries at Louisville Seminary

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Theme: How congregations can strengthen their ministry with families, particularly in communicating the Christian faith from one generation to another.

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about thirty-three funerals (6.58: 3.91: 4.62: 7) There is no
to believe that Catholics today spend more time in the
parish office or in their own homes than in the
This is the case in every church, and the
has increased significantly over the past decade.
and place.
Furthermore, the distribution of priests around
the county is not even. Some
dioceses have quite favor-
able ratios of Catholics to priests, while others make
strangely high ratios. We
might ease the
difficulty of some
dioceses consider-
sably (perhaps
declining numerically)
if we were able to
priests across
diocesan
boundaries.
In any event, there is probably no
way to calculate an
optimal number (or distribution)
of priests, but without a
satisfactory way of doing it even for
individual dioceses. As a
result, our "shortage"
may be less a shortage than a
smaller-than-desirable
quantity. We may never
really have enough priests for
everything we might find
worth doing.

Desired and Supply.
The first misconception is that
the crisis will be resolved
by stimulating new vocations in
order to meet the needs of the
diocese. The second misconception is that
the problems will be solved
by increasing the number of
priests. There are, however, three things that
one might do when faced with a
shortage. The first, of course, is to
effect an increase in the supply. The second,
which is more difficult, is to reduce the
dependency on the number of priests. The third,
is to change the nature of the work done by
the priests. This will
result in a
shortage.

Role of the Deacon.
The most significant, and often overlooked,
ministries, are those that
have been dormant for years. While the
number of priests has dropped since
the 1960s, the number of
clergy (priests and deacons)
is now higher. In other
dioceses, the decrease in the number of
priests has been partly
offset by an increase in
the number of deacons, and
the number of
priests in the diocese.

Another change in the past 30 years has been the
dramatic increase in the
employment of laypeople as staff on
parish and diocesan
councils. There are now tens of
thousands of lay
people working in the church,
many of whom hold
positions that were once occupied by
priests. Their
criticism should be
welcomed and used to
improve the
diocese.

Furthermore, considerable
talents and skills are
required to manage the
different aspects of
diocesan life. Some
dioceses have quite a
number of deacons, while
others have very few or none.
Even where they are active in large
numbers, some confusion often exists about what
their proper roles might be and how best they may
contribute to the
work of parish ministry.

We may also improve the
cardinal virtues of
laypeople, both
volunteers and professional
staff. Through better
evaluation, training, and
career development,
laypeople can be employed with
greater effectiveness. This is unlikely to
happen, though, unless

and until pastors become more skilful in calling forth the contributions laypeople are able to make and in managing them well.

*Discovering New Structures.*

The third, and perhaps most challenging, option is to use what is available more efficiently or to make do with less. In practice this is likely to mean adapting the organization of parishes and dioceses to reflect changing populations and needs and reshaping the "job description" of priests so that their work is structured more rationally.

One reason we have not pursued the third option more aggressively is that we are often constrained by the church's fixed assets. Most of these fixed assets are specialist-use buildings: churches, schools and the like. These assets require a sizable portion of our revenues for maintenance and also restrict our thinking and our choices. We have built for generations, but our structures and organizational schemes have often outlived the population patterns they were based upon and intended to serve.

Many dioceses, both urban and rural, urgently need to reconsider their internal organization. Specifically, they need to return to the questions about how many parishes to have, where they ought to be and how large they ought to be. Most bishops are living with decisions made decades or generations ago, when population patterns, transportation and information and communication technologies were far different. For many reasons they are reluctant to choose the always-painful course of closing parishes, but keeping too many parishes open helps to create an avoidable "shortage" of priests. What is needed, though it is never likely to be thoroughly adopted, is a policy for the rational allocation of resources according to need, not according to tradition or politics.

Finally, we must rethink the "job description" of the parish priest. The Second Vatican Council speaks of three priestly roles: to preach the Gospel (and all that this entails), to celebrate the sacraments and to lead the people of God. For some aspects of each role the parish priest is indispensable, but for other aspects he could, and should, find collaborators among the laity and permanent deacons. In many cases, qualified laypeople are better able to perform tasks that have traditionally been assigned to priests. Much more could be said about this, but one requirement for successful implementation of an improved job description would be a modification of professional preparation (whether allied

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organizational structure and experiencing the discomfort of adapting to a new one.

*Use New Resources.*

Will we ever have enough priests? Probably not, if having enough means that we could not find useful employment for any more. The question itself may be misleading, however, if it assumes that priests must continue doing whatever they have done in the past. In recent years many other professions have restructured and now share responsibilities to patients and clients with a variety of collaborators. The same process must occur within the church. The health of the ecclesial community is not directly measured by the number of priests. To be sure, every priest, every deacon, and every member of a religious community is a gift to be treasured by the church, but the call to holiness is universal. The response of the entire community to that call is the true measure of its health.

We have fewer priests than we might wish to have, but this may not be a shortage, or at least not a critical shortage. Instead, we have other resources that were not available to previous generations. The church in the United States is far better placed to address the demands of pastoral ministry than we commonly suppose. The real question is not whether we will have enough priests, but whether we are willing to find new ways to collaborate with and support the priests we have in order to sustain the church as the community of holiness that it ought to be.