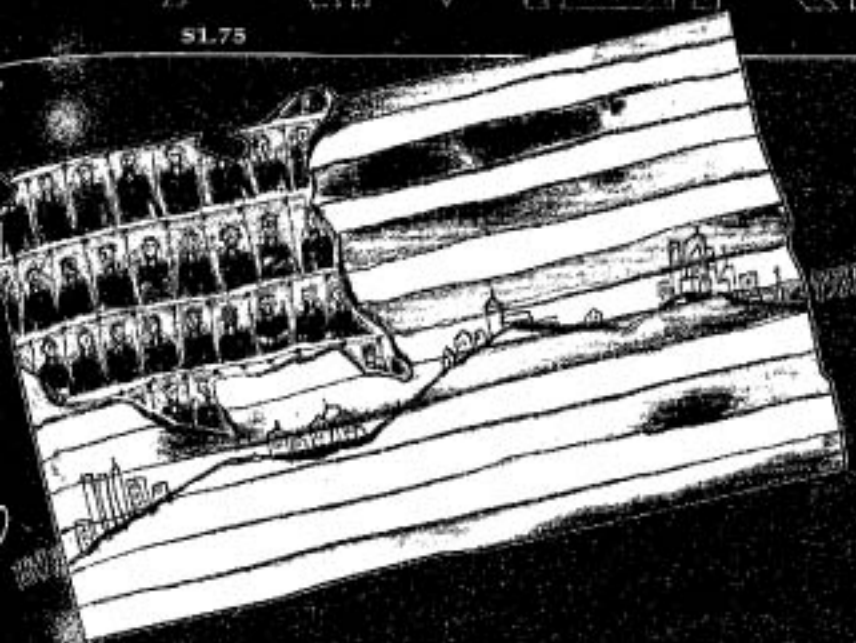


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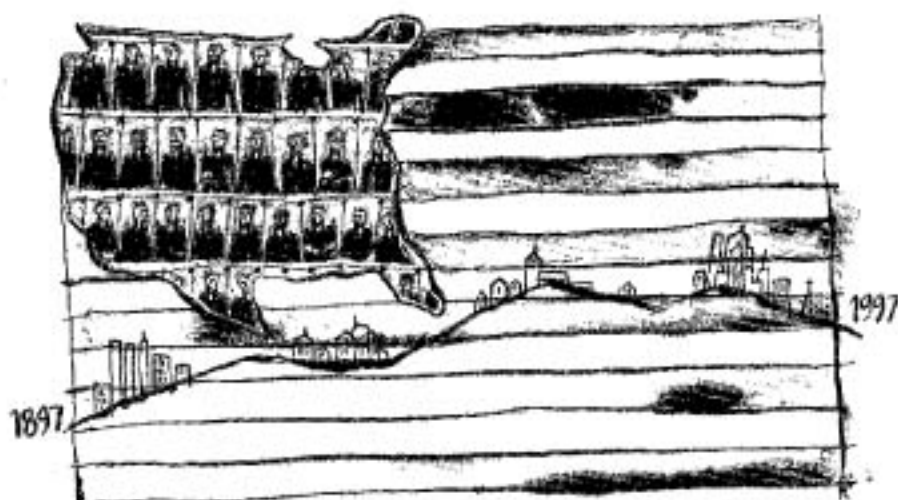
**PASTORAL CARE**

*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?



By ROBERT G. KENNEDY

**P**RIESTLY 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 anecdotes 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 concerned that we may face 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 Offi-

cial 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 parochial levels. They can help us to dispel at least five misconceptions about the status of priestly ministry today.

### 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 follow-

ing 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 1996), this is not the most important figure. What counts here is not the absolute number of priests but the ratio of priests to the Catholic population. In 1966 there were about 780 Catholics per priest, as compared to 1,272 Catholics per priest today. This is certainly a decline, but an examination of the data reveals that the decline began in 1942. 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 55 years the proportion of priests has been steadily declining, more sharply in the past 25 years. Even if the events following the council accelerated this decline, it already had considerable momentum by the mid-1960's. 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 it into doubt. In 1966 there were about 45,400 seminarians in the United States in about 575 seminaries, while there are only about 4,600 today in 200 seminaries. The earlier figure, however, includes 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 principally collegiate and post-collegiate students. Furthermore, the dropout rate for high school and college seminarians was enormous; some have suggested as high as 80 to 90 percent, while the dropout rate today for collegiate and post-collegiate seminarians is smaller. If we assume the 80 percent dropout rate, then perhaps only 9,000 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 "defection" rate 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 so 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 unprecedented shortage. Once again the data undermine our confidence in this conclusion. If we were to graph the ratio of Catholics to priests year by year throughout the century, we would trace a curved 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 would be a certain symmetry in this curve because the number of Catholics per priest in 1900 would be nearly the same as in 1983 (about 900). In the late 19th century the proportion probably approximated that of the 1990's, but we cannot say with confidence because 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 year-to-year 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 active priests has probably declined further than the raw numbers indicate.

The proportion of active Catholics, however, has almost certainly declined as well. We have no firm measure of this, but there are some indications to be found in the number of baptisms, weddings and funerals counted for each year. The number of each per 1,000 Catholics has certainly declined. In fact, if we were to compare a hypothetical "average" priest in 1945 with an average priest in 1995, we would find that the priest today performs a few more baptisms (20.34 then, 24.28 now), witnesses about the same number of marriages each year (6.29 then, 6.17 now), but presides over



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about three more funerals (6.58 then, 9.46 now). There is no reason to believe that Catholics today spend more time in the confessional than their predecessors did 50 years ago.

In sum, though the present situation is not unprecedented, it certainly merits serious attention. The proportion of

participation rates and diversity, are outside administrative control. Consequently, a number that might be appropriate for one time and place could be too high or too low in another time and place.

Furthermore, the distribution of priests around the country is not even. Some dioceses have quite favorable ratios of Catholics to priests, while others have stunningly high ratios. We might ease the difficulty of some dioceses considerably (especially rural ones) if we were able to transfer priests across diocesan boundaries.

In any event, there is probably no reliable way to calculate an optimal number (or distribution) of priests nationwide, and quite likely no 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.

#### Demand and Supply.

The fifth misconception is that the crisis will be resolved by stimulating more vocations, even if this means making significant changes in the requirements for acceptable candidates. There are, however, three things that one might do when faced with a shortage. The first, of course, is to make an effort to increase the supply. The response throughout most of the century to the perceived deficiency in numbers of priests has almost always been to pursue this option—that is, either to encourage efforts to increase vocations or to welcome priests from outside the country.

Efforts to increase vocations are certainly legitimate. We should continue to pursue them aggressively, but these efforts are unlikely in themselves to resolve whatever problems we face. One reason for this is that action taken to stimulate new vocations today, assuming we knew just how to do this, would not bear fruit in ordinations for at least five to ten years. Another reason simply concerns the numbers involved. We would need a 50 percent to 75 percent increase in the number of ordinations in the next few years merely to offset the numbers leaving active ministry. In order to reduce the number of Catholics per priest significantly over the next decade, at a time when the Catholic population will continue to grow, we may require three times the number of ordinations we have had in recent years. In short, decades of declining vocations and defec-

tions from active ministry cannot be remedied in a few years, nor are we likely to receive thousands of young priests from other parts of the world.

As important as it may be to encourage new vocations, we must also become more creative in pursuing two other options. One is to employ substitutes, and this may take several forms. Current suggestions to the effect that we change the qualifications for ordination to include married men, or to readmit married priests to active ministry, fall into this category. The controversy surrounding proposals to change these qualifications, however, and the Vatican responses, indicate that such proposals will not soon be implemented, and may well never be approved. Furthermore, they probably would not be as effective as their advocates suppose and would certainly give rise to another, perhaps even less desirable, set of problems.

More promising possibilities lie in the direction of finding other substitutes for some of the roles and tasks associated with priests in pastoral work. Some dioceses, for example, have experimented with the appointment of parish administrators who are not priests, but these efforts have been neither systematic nor particularly innovative.

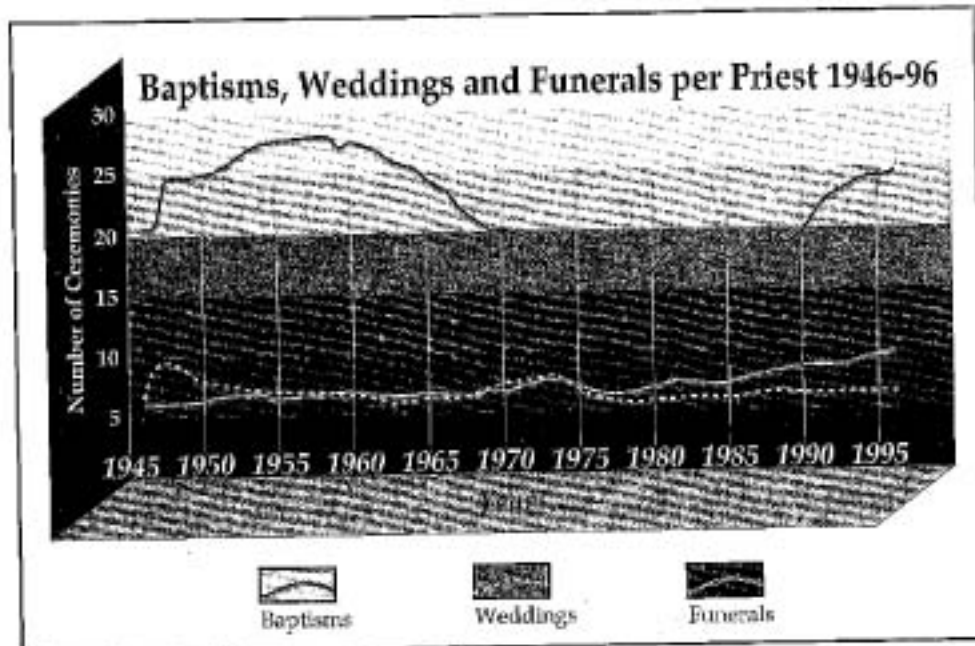
#### Role of the Deacon.

The most significant, and often overlooked, substitutes, though, have been permanent deacons. While the number of priests has dropped since its peak in 1966, the number of clergy (priests and deacons) is now higher. In other words, the decline in the number of priests has been partly offset by the ordination of over 12,000 permanent deacons. Now I would be among the first to argue, for a host of reasons, that permanent deacons are not simply, or even primarily, replacements for priests. Even so, it remains true that, since the days of the apostolic church, deacons have shared the responsibilities of pastoral ministry with bishops and priests, and they continue to do so in significant ways.

Another change in the past 30 years has been the dramatic increase in the employment of laypeople as staff on parish and diocesan levels. There are now tens of thousands of lay men and women working in the church, many of whom hold places that were once occupied by priests. Their contribution should not be overlooked in evaluating the impact and severity of the shortage of priests.

Furthermore, considerable potential remains to be realized concerning both permanent deacons and laity. The distribution of deacons throughout the country is uneven. Some dioceses have quite a few active 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 pastoral ministry.

We may also improve the contribution of laypeople, both volunteers and professional staff. Through better training and more carefully considered job designs and career paths, laypeople can be employed with greater effectiveness. This is unlikely to happen, though, unless



active priests to active Catholics is probably lower than it has been since early in the century. As we shall see, however, there is more to the story.

#### Anxiety for the Ideal.

The fourth misconception is that there is an optimal number, or proportion, of priests that we ought to have, and probably once had. In fact, however, at no time in this century were Catholics confident that they had enough priests. Representative articles from each decade of the 20th century talk about a crisis in priestly vocations and about the need to nurture new vocations in order to avoid disaster. The anxiety expressed is remarkably similar from one decade to another. The principal change is that, where writers 50 and 60 years ago worried about whether enough priests would be available for teaching and missionary work, we are concerned that there will be enough to staff our parishes and celebrate Mass on Sunday.

This sounds serious, and in many ways it is, but I would suggest very strongly that no optimal number of priests can be identified. One of the principal reasons for this is that the number of priests needed is dynamic, not static. It depends on various factors—the proportion of active Catholics (and the ways in which they are active), the number of parishes, the geography of an area, the ethnic and linguistic diversity of an area and even the expectations about priestly roles. Some of these factors, such as the number and size of parishes, may change in response to rising or declining numbers of priests. Others, like par-



## WHAT DO MOSSES, GANDHI, AND MARY MAGDALEN HAVE IN COMMON?

Robert Flanagan

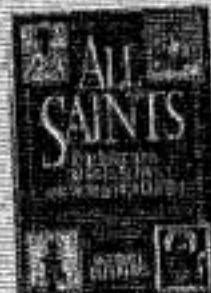
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and until pastors become more skillful in calling forth the contributions laypeople are able to make and in managing them well.

#### *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 special-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

with or separate from seminary training) to teach these young men how to be successful leaders and administrators. At present, this has little place in the formal preparation of priests for active ministry, and its absence contributes significantly to the stress of their work lives.

Moved by concern over the declining number of priests, people often wonder what is to become of the church. The answer may be that it is becoming more like the church envisioned by the council, a church less directly dependent upon priests to do its work but more strongly animated by their leadership. This leadership would call forth and organize the talents and contributions of the people of God in new ways. For the foreseeable future the number of lay people active in the church is likely to increase, while the number of clerics and religious will continue to diminish. This will be a change, certainly, but not by any means a crisis, nor even a regrettable development. Perhaps in some ways we are outgrowing an older

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. ■

## *What is needed is a policy for the rational allocation of resources according to need, not according to tradition or politics.*