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Catholic numbers worldwide up, Vatican says

Francis X. Rocca Religion News Service | Feb. 23, 2011

VATICAN CITY -- The number of Catholics in the world edged up 1 percent in 2009, the Vatican said, bringing to 1.18 billion the number of adherents of the world?s largest church.

The statistics appear in the latest edition of the Vatican?s ?Annuario Pontificio,? or pontifical yearbook, which was presented to Pope Benedict XVI Feb. 19.

About half of the world?s Catholics live in North and South America, with 24 percent found in Europe, 15 percent in Africa and nearly 11 percent in Asia.

The number of bishops increased along with their flock, by about 1 percent, from 5,002 to 5,065.

Growth in the number of priests, meanwhile, was much more modest: less than 0.2 percent, according to a separate publication, the ?Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae,? or the church?s statistical yearbook, also released this month.

Still, that net gain of 809 priests was the biggest single-year increase in the number of Catholic clergy since 1999.

The church?s 410,593 priests at the end of 2009 represented a 1.3 percent increase over the course of an entire decade.

?Numbers of diocesan clergy are falling in Europe and increasing in all the other continents,? the Vatican said in a statement, ?while numbers of (priests in religious orders) are in general decline, with the exception of Asia and Africa.?

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