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Keeping an eye on the falling baptism rate

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Religion News Service reports that baptism rates are falling at a rapid pace among both Catholics and Baptists. Among Catholics, there were slightly more than 1 million baptisms in 1970; in 2011, that number was down to 793,103.

Jesuit Fr. Jim Martin of *America* magazine, who was interviewed for the story, said he is worried many parents don't really understand the theology of baptism: "It's become a rite of passage for the family rather than what it really means -- an incorporation into the Christian community." Sometimes, he said, "They are surprised that preparation is involved."

Mark Gray, senior research associate at Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, cited the increasing number of out-of-wedlock births: "Single parents may be less apt to bring a child for baptism because of a misapprehension that they won't be welcome."

Add to that the increasing number of interfaith marriages, where the couple might negotiate issues like baptizing offspring.

But the Baptists interviewed may have put their finger on the larger trend: the growing secularism in the United States, where one in five people now claim no particular religious tradition.

The Rev. Frank Page, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's executive committee, offered this analysis: "People want God but they're not happy with churches." That's a Catholic reality as well as a Baptist one.

This decline in baptisms is a trend well worth watching as the secular trend picks up its pace in North America. Fewer baptisms will accelerate that secularism as decades move forward and the babies grow to

adulthood without a religious mooring. This is already a massive trend in Western Europe, where secularism has become dominant in many places. We may now be watching the beginning of that same trend in North America.

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