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Demographers examine parish challenges of the 21st century

Tom Roberts | Apr. 5, 2014
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The story of the Catholic church in the United States has become a tale of two churches: In the Northeast and upper Midwest, the church is shrinking, and in the South and West, the church is flourishing and membership is increasing, in some cases dramatically.

That's the conclusion demographers presented at a conference titled "The Catholic Parish in the 21st Century: Challenges and Opportunities [1]," held at Villanova University in early March. The conference was a joint venture of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University and Villanova's Center for Church Management and Business Ethics. This year marks CARA's 50th anniversary and the Center for Church Management's 10th anniversary.

In its 50 years, CARA has developed a vast treasure of data on the church in the United States and its ever-changing profile. Its continual studies and surveys, which generate mountains of data, reinforce some themes increasingly familiar to Catholics:

- If you're from the Northeast or the Midwest and grew up in the iconic parish setting that reached its zenith during the last century, with rectories full of priests and convents full of sisters, it can "feel" as if the church is contracting [2], with parishes, schools and other church facilities closing and/or merging. That's because it is in that region.
- If you live in the South or West, however, it can seem as if the church is exploding [3], with full pews and lots of new churches and demands for more.
- Wherever you are, you're correct if you perceive that church governance has changed, with more involvement of laypeople and far fewer priests and sisters than was the case of the pre-Vatican II and post-Vatican II generations of the mid- to late 20th century.
- And wherever you are, but particularly in the South and West, you're likely to run into an increasing number of ethnicities as well as Masses celebrated in Spanish and other languages.

Some of the growth in the South and West, said Melissa Alidade, CARA research assistant, is due to immigration, and some of it is due to natural increase. Though Catholic families are the same size as others in the culture, most of the growth -- and, correspondingly, the diminishment in the Northeast and Upper Midwest -- is due to internal migration. People are shifting to where the jobs exist. She said the data suggest "parishes will continue to close but that the pace will slow and that a lot of the growing pains will begin to settle out."

As that pattern settles and the number of priests available for active duty in the parishes continues to drop, the result will be an increase in the number of parishes without a resident pastor, she said.

That situation in turn will lead to new models of parish leadership, Alidade said. One in four parishes currently is a "multiparish ministry site," meaning that parishes are sharing staff and other resources but original worship spaces remain active.

The survey showed that those attending church were considerably satisfied with their parish, a result perhaps not surprising given that the poll was of "people in the pews."

Mark Gray, a CARA research associate and author of the organization's blog, 1964 [4], said the most frequent question he has received from reporters in recent months is whether he can detect a "Francis effect" in the numbers attending Mass and sacraments.

His answer: "We can't know yet."

The most recent results he has are from two polls commissioned by the U.S. bishops and conducted in 2008 and again in 2012. The bishops, he said, "wanted to know more about what Catholics thought about sacraments and what sacramental life was like for average Catholics."

For those attending Mass weekly, he said, each of the sacraments is meaningful. For those attending less than weekly but at least once a month, baptism, Eucharist, marriage and confirmation receive top billing. Among those who attend less often than once a month, "there is a significant drop-off in the significance of sacraments," and for that group, "marriage moves into the top spot ahead of baptism and Eucharist."

By comparing the percentage of Catholics in the general population (24 percent, a figure Gray said has been consistent for decades) and the number of live births in the U.S. population at large to the number of baptisms, marriages and funerals, CARA was able to draw some conclusions about sacramental practice.

Infant baptisms, he said, have fallen to 20 percent [5] of all live births. "So that means there are some people out there who self-identify as Catholic but who aren't baptizing their children, or at least not right away as infants." He later noted that the number of baptisms of older children increased over the time span between the two polls, "which could indicate that parents are merely waiting to have their children baptized."

Gray also dispelled the presumption that the Catholic church's growth was entirely dependent on immigration. He said 58 percent of new Catholics in any given year come in through baptism or through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) program.

Twenty-four percent who enter in any given year were baptized in another country and come in through immigration, he said, and 18 percent "are estimated to be the people coming home," also referred to as "reverts."

"So the Catholic church would still grow without immigration. It would be quite small, but it would still be positive growth," Gray said.

Gray said the surveys showed that the number of funerals has remained fairly consistent since the 1970s, but marriages in a Catholic church have dropped significantly -- from 20 percent of all marriages in the country in the 1970s to 8 percent today. It isn't the case that Catholics aren't marrying, Gray said; they just aren't marrying in the parish.

Another significant indicator for the future of the church may be the answer to the question: Do you consider yourself a strong Catholic?

"The percentage who answered 'yes' went from about 47 percent in 1974 to 27 percent in 2012," Gray said.

That answer, combined with the increase in the number of people who attend Mass regularly but do not register as parishioners, constitutes part of the profile that "indicates that we have a growing population with weakening ties."

Part of the drop in registration can be attributed to immigrants, who tend to register less than native-born Catholics, Gray said, but part of it is attributed to "age and trends in the wider culture."

"Younger people tend not to join membership organizations, and that goes, too, for the church," he said.

No matter where Catholics gather and regardless of their satisfaction levels, they give far less to their churches than most other religious groups, said Charles Zech, director of Villanova's Center for Church Management and Business Ethics.

In a talk on stewardship, Zech said studies show that the average Catholic household gives 1.2 percent of income to the church while the average Protestant household gives twice that, 2.4 percent.

If Catholic households matched that percentage, the church's revenues would double from $8 billion a year nationally to $16 billion, Zech said.

"What could your parish do with double the income every year? Think of the outreach we could do. Think of the facilities we're allowing to fall apart because we can't maintain them. Think of the scandalously low salaries we pay our church workers. That's what's at stake here," he said.

Stewardship, however, is more than fundraising, he said. It involves changing people's minds and hearts from the view that "they are giving to a need" to "they have a need to give."

To reach that point, Zech said his studies have showed that five principles are important to both increase involvement in the parish and increase giving:

- Have a stewardship committee, preferably one separate from other committees and with the same status as the pastoral and finance councils.
- Communicate on stewardship through parish newsletters and websites as well as personal witness. Bulletins are fairly ineffective in changing giving habits.
- Establish some form of pledge or commitment such as tithing. Instituting electronic transfer from individuals' accounts has worked well to increase giving, he said.
- Have a separate finance committee or council that deals with parish budgets and such.
- Conduct open parish forums such as town meetings where people have the opportunity to give input.

He said the last point is important because "people want a say -- not the final say" in how their money is used. He said surveys have shown that "parishes that exercised transparency in seeking input on how the money is spent and accounting for expenditures experienced a 29 percent increase in giving."

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[1] http://www1.villanova.edu/villanova/business/centers/churchmanagement/programs/materials.html
[2] http://nineteensixty-four.blogspot.com/2011/07/theyre-here-forget-whole-if-you-build.html

[3] http://nineteensixty-four.blogspot.com/2010/11/pies-damned-pies-and-statistics-is.html
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