

"U.S. Parishes Today"
Week of September 12, 2011
ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY
By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

Some Catholics who spend the winter in Florida report overflowing churches for weekend Masses. Does this indicate that the Catholic Church in the United States is a lot healthier than others have suggested?

A recent study produced by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., says otherwise. (For an executive summary of the report, see *Origins*, "The Changing Face of U.S. Catholic Parishes," 8/18/11, pp. 194-5.)

The project, "Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership," was funded by a Lilly Endowment grant to CARA, with the collaboration of five other Catholic organizations: the National Association for Lay Ministry, the Conference for Pastoral Planning and Council Development, the National Association of Church Personnel Administrators, the National Catholic Young Adult Ministry Association, and the National Federation of Priests' Councils.

The principal result of the study is that more U.S. Catholics are attending Masses at fewer parishes staffed by a rapidly declining number of priests. CARA found that the number of Catholic parishes has declined by 1,359 since the year 2000 to 17,784 in 2010, representing a 7.1 percent decrease.

Unfortunately, although smaller parishes (200 households or less) are more likely to be closed or merged with larger parishes, there is a higher rate of Mass attendance at smaller parishes than at larger ones.

But the percentage of smaller parishes dropped from 24 percent in 2000 to 15 percent in 2010. Parishes with more than 1,200 registered households now make up 33 percent of all parishes.

It is of special interest that 40 percent of all growth in registered parishioners in U.S. parishes from 2005 to 2010 occurred among Hispanics/Latino(a)s. In fact, almost one in three parishes celebrates Mass at least once a month in a language other than English. Of these, 81 percent is in Spanish.

The average number of Mass attendees at weekend Masses in October was 1,110, or 38 percent of registered parishioners. This number represented 47 percent of parish capacity (number of Masses multiplied by seating capacity).

On average, however, respondents indicated that the proportion of parishioners who are non-Hispanic white has decreased in the last five years as Catholics of other races and ethnic backgrounds make up a larger portion of registered parishioners.

As far as finances are concerned, 30 percent of parishes indicate that their expenses exceeded their revenue. Of those parishes reporting a deficit, the average size of the shortfall was 15.8 percent of revenue.

Smaller parishes generally collect more per registered household in the offertory collection than larger parishes. But it is the smaller parishes that are being closed or merged with larger ones, and it is the larger, standing-room-only parishes that give some Catholics the wrong impression that all is well with the Catholic Church in the United States.

The closing or merging of smaller parishes with larger ones is a relatively recent development, beginning sometime after 2004.

As far as programs and ministries are concerned, parishes are most likely to meet pastoral needs for sacramental preparation and religious education, and for the sick and homebound (86 percent).

Majorities have youth ministry (76 percent), ministry to seniors (64 percent), social services to meet individual needs (59 percent), and ministry to the bereaved (54 percent).

Staffing of parishes yields some of the most compelling data. The estimated number of lay ecclesial ministers (that is, those who are paid and who work at least 20 hours per week) is approximately 38,000, or 2.1 percent per parish. Fourteen percent of these are vowed religious, while 86 percent are laypersons.

Overall, 80 percent are female—a statistic that has remained steady for many years and which makes the continued alienation of Catholic women a serious and growing pastoral problem.

Parish staffs (including bookkeepers, janitors, and cooks) also consist of large numbers of women (52 percent). One in four members of the ministry staff is a diocesan priest.

It is of much significance that parish staff members and lay ecclesial ministers consist of an aging population. Fifty-six percent are between the ages of 50 and 69. Fifty-five percent of ministry staff, including priests, are also between these ages.

That is why this study is so important. As noted at the outset, more U.S. Catholics are attending Masses at fewer parishes staffed by a rapidly declining number of priests.

The rosy impression that some vacationing Catholics have of the health of the Catholic Church in the United States is simply wrong.

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"The Shortest Pontificate and a Heretical One"
 Week of September 19, 2011
 ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY
 By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

Many Catholics and media people—at least those with enough interest to care—believe that the late Pope John Paul I must have had the shortest pontificate of all time. Not so. John Paul I is generally regarded as having had the 11th shortest pontificate in all of papal history: 33 days.

On the other hand, the current 10th shortest pontificate (Benedict V, May 22-June 23, 964, or 32 days) may some day be stricken from the record books because his pontificate was canonically dubious. But John Paul I's 33 days in office will still be well behind the pack.

Actually, the shortest pontificate of all was that of Urban VII, who was elected on September 15, 1590, and who died 12 days later, before his coronation, on September 27.

Born Giovan Battista Castagna, he was the nephew of Cardinal Verallo. This blood relationship certainly did not hurt. He would serve as papal legate to France, archbishop of Rosanno (also Rozzano), governor in the Papal States, an active participant at the Council of Trent (1562-63), nuncio to Spain, consultor (later inquisitor general) to the Holy Office, and a cardinal-priest of San Marcello al Corso (1583).

When he was elected pope, many had great hopes that his would be a reformist but temperate pontificate. Although he had been in good health up to that point, he contracted malaria the night after his election and died soon thereafter. He was buried in the basilica of Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome.

He was succeeded by Niccolò Sfondrati, with the assistance of the pro-Spanish cardinals and after a two-month conclave. He took the name of the pope who had made him a cardinal, Gregory XIII. Unfortunately, he was one of the least popular and least successful of all the popes in history.

One could wonder about the subsequent history of the Church had Urban VII lived and Gregory XIV had never been elected, just as one could wonder what the years after John Paul I's election would have been like if *he* had lived and John Paul II had never been elected.

September was also the month in which one of three popes (Vigilius and Honorius I were the others) who fell into material (as opposed to formal, or knowing and deliberate) heresy died. Indeed, Liberius, elected on May 17, 352, was the first pope not to be listed among the saints and is generally regarded to have been a weak pope.

He first opposed the Arians' condemnation of St. Athanasius of Alexandria (d. 373), the leading figure at the Council of Nicaea in 325, for which he was deposed from office by the Arian emperor Constantius and sent into harsh exile in Thrace.

Liberius eventually submitted and was readmitted to the Roman see, which by that time and with the support of the emperor had elected a second bishop, Felix II (d. 365), technically an antipope.

It is interesting to note that Damasus, Liberius' eventual successor in the papacy, was for a time in Felix's service as a deacon, in defiance of the oath taken by the Roman clergy not to recognize anyone else as the Bishop of Rome while Liberius was still alive.

The Roman public, however, never accepted Felix as their bishop, and clamored for the return of Liberius. The emperor, under popular pressure, allowed Liberius to go back to Rome, but on the condition that he jointly rule with Felix.

Felix, however, retreated to the suburbs of Rome in the face of a potential riot, but it was only after the death of Constantius in 361 that Liberius returned to orthodoxy and made an effort to restore the Nicene faith to the universal Church.

He published a decree voiding the decisions of the pro-Arian Synod of Rimini (359), at which the Western bishops had been bullied into accepting an Arian creed.

At the same time, Liberius urged his fellow Italian bishops to reestablish communion with those bishops who had embraced the Rimini decisions, on condition that they now accept the Nicene Creed. He did the same for Eastern bishops four years later.

Liberius was also the builder of the huge Liberian Basilica, which was transformed in the fifth century to the major basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore (St. Mary Major), which still stands today as one of the four major basilicas of Rome (along with St. Peter's, St. John Lateran, and St. Paul's Outside the Walls).

Liberius, however, has usually been remembered as a betrayer of the faith and his name was even invoked by opponents of papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council (1870).

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