

So, What's the Real Story? Facts on Numbers of Priests – Past, Present, and Future



*Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest."
(Matthew 9:37-38)*

Recent changes in numbers of priests

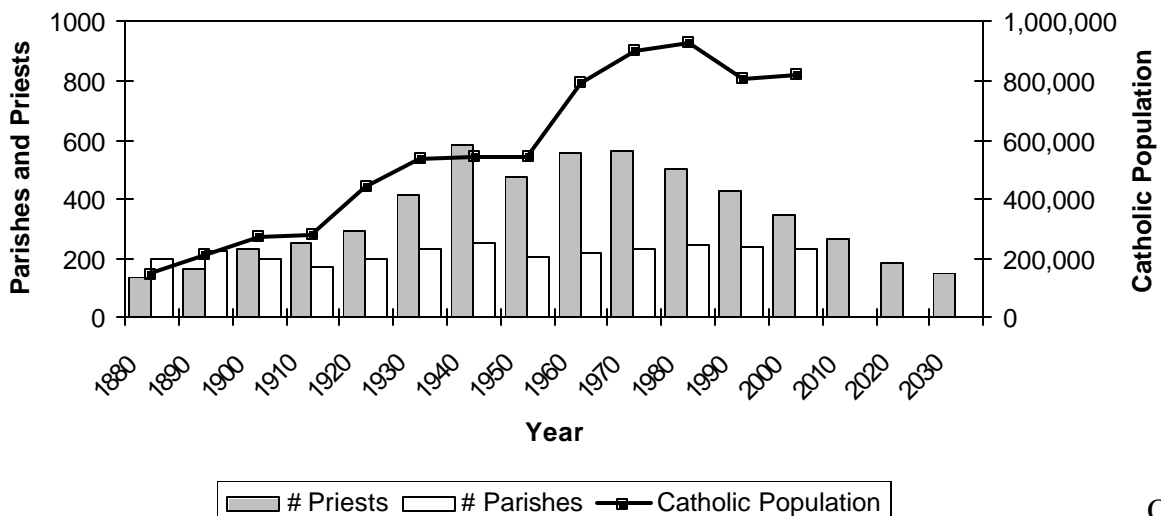
In Bishop Anthony Pilla's letter on *Vibrant Parish Life – Phase II* he addressed the very real implications of fewer priests being available today. Nationally, between 1975 and 2005 the numbers of priests declined by about 21%. Today two-thirds of the dioceses in the United States have fewer priests than parishes.¹

In the Diocese of Cleveland, we have also experienced decline and our priest population is aging. Between 1970 and 2005, our number of diocesan priests declined by 27%. In 1970, 240 of the priests were under the age of 40. Today, we have a total of 296 "active" priests (i.e. priests below the retirement age of 70). There are only 29 priests under the age of 40. Projections done for our diocese based on current trends and an average of 5 ordinations per year indicate that this decline will continue into the future. By 2015 our Diocese will have fewer active priests than our current number of parishes which totals 233. By 2020, we will have only 189 active priests. The number will decrease to an estimated 151 active priests by 2030. These statistics are reflected in the charts below. An increase in vocations can significantly change these numbers.

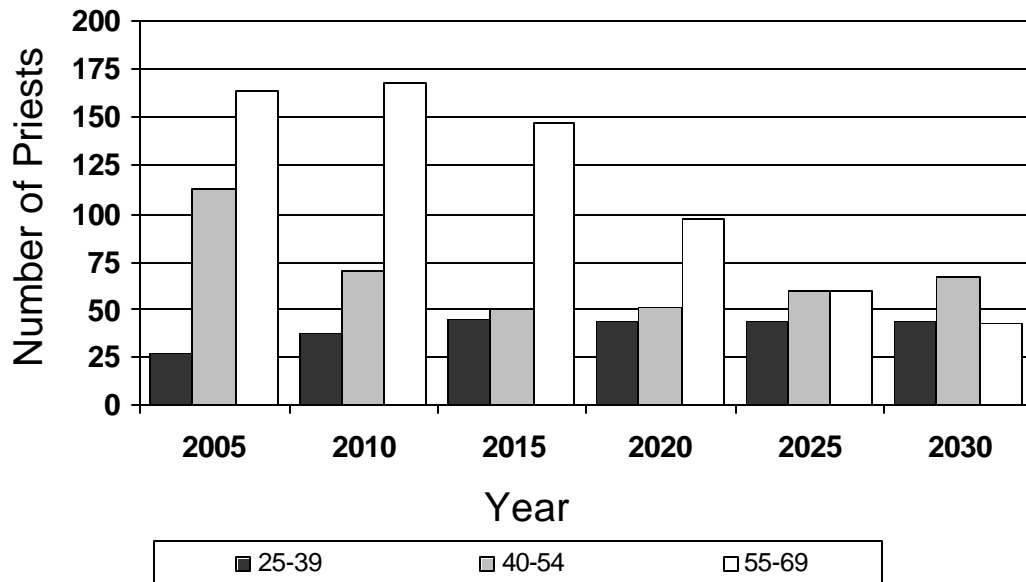
An historical perspective

While these numbers are sobering, it is helpful to take a look at the past and understand the reality of numbers of available priests over time. Prior to World War I the number of priests was also low. In 1880 there were only 137 diocesan priests serving 199 parishes in our diocese! There are stories in the diocesan archives of how our priests faced the challenges of meeting the needs of the faithful. But as the world wars drew to a close our country grew stronger in every way and that also held true for the Catholic Church in the United States. Bing Crosby movies portrayed a very popular image of priesthood that was experienced in those days. Seminary classes were brimming in the mid twentieth century. A strong sense of Catholic identity; the support of the Catholic school system and the encouragement of the many religious who staffed those schools; and most significantly, an atmosphere in the home which held a religious vocation in high esteem – all contributed to inspiring vocations to the priesthood. By 1940 the number of diocesan priests in Cleveland reached the peak of 582, serving 258 parishes. We enjoyed the service of over twice as many priests as parishes! The realities of the numbers of priests today and into the future are similar to what was experienced prior to the boon of the post war era. The challenges that lie ahead in ministering to the faithful are not new to the Catholic Church.

Diocesan Priests, Parishes and Catholic Population



Priests Available for Active Service Under Age 70 in Specific Age-Ranges 2005-2030ⁱⁱ



A look to the future

As the numbers of priests continue to decline and parish life becomes more complex, we cannot expect one priest to do the work once done by two or three priests. We must be open to new ways of accomplishing all the good work that needs to be done in the church. In the upcoming Educational Documents on Parish Staffing you will see ways the church is adapting to these challenges as the Holy Spirit continues to call us to build vibrant parish life.

Note: Historically, between 1/4 - 1/2 of the priests in our diocese have been from religious orders and are not represented in the numbers quoted on this document. In 2005, approximately 7% of our parishes are staffed by religious order priests.

Going Deeper:

As you reflect upon the information provided about the declining numbers of priests in our parishes, consider the following questions:

1. How has this trend touched us?
2. Has our parish community adjusted our expectations of our priests in light of the declining number of priests?
3. What sort of change in parish life might we expect based on these projections?
4. What have we done as individuals and families to foster priestly vocations? What have we done as a parish community to foster priestly vocations?
5. Where is the Spirit leading us in light of this trend?

ⁱ The CARA Report, Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate – Georgetown University – Vol. 10, No.3 Winter 2005

ⁱⁱ A Projection of Priest for the Diocese of Cleveland, Study by CARA, June 2005

Next week: Number 7 in our VPL series.... “Aren’t There Untapped Resources of Priests?”