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IDAHO VOCATIONS

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

STATE OF PRIESTLY VOCATIONS IN THE U.S.



Vocation Director's Corner

"The future of the Church and each person's own salvation depends on the presence of a holy priesthood in the world. Vocation Ministry's hope is that this report will shine a light on how the Church fosters vocations more effectively and will bring about a revival of the priesthood."

In this month's edition of our Vocation Newsletter, I wanted to share with all of you some important information regarding a recent study on the current state of vocations in the United States. This report, carried out by the National Vocation Ministry organization, is clear about the problems we are facing, but also the hope we can have in clear paths forward to help remedy the situation. All quotations are taken straight from their report which can be found in full version at vocationministry.com

This will be a special edition of our Vocation Newsletter without individual testimonies from seminarians or families, giving us a chance to just look at the data and reflect on how we can use it to build vocations in our own diocese accordingly.

"Our great hope and prayer is that this information will be a turning point for the cultivation of priestly vocations in the United States."

"Vocation Ministry is a non-profit organization that trains, equips, and encourages priests, laity, and educators to light a fire of vocations in parishes and schools through awareness and prayer. It is committed to the goal of creating an environment in every parish, school, and family that encourages and allows men and women to easily say "Yes" to God's call in their lives to the priesthood, consecrated life, or sacramental marriage. Vocation Ministry has given over 135 diocesan-wide workshops for priests, parishioners, and educators in over 50 dioceses."

Regardless of the factors affecting the priesthood today, 75 percent of newly ordained priests, year over year, report having heard the call before 18 years of age. Just based on this, priests need to become vocation promoters at their parishes, cultivating the harvest with boys and young adult men who are in the pews each week, by inviting, encouraging, and mentoring them until they are ready to visit with the diocesan vocation director.

The State of Priestly Vocations in the United States

taken from vocationministry.com

Vocation Ministry, an organization dedicated to supporting and increasing vocations, has published a first-of-its-kind report that details an accurate picture of what the priestly vocation crisis looks like and provides insights that will hopefully propel dioceses toward solutions.

The report seeks to “quantify a crisis,” assigning each American diocese to a tier based on its Catholic population. The four-tier system allowed analysts to offer evidence-based conclusions about the scale and root causes of the nationwide priest shortage.

“Without priests, we do not have the Eucharist, and without the Eucharist, we do not have a Church,” Rhonda Gruenewald, foundress of Vocation Ministry, told CatholicVote.

“We spent hundreds of hours researching what could be causing the severe lack of priests that most dioceses experience and how to remedy the problem,” she said

Prior to the report’s public release, Vocation Ministry sent a paper copy to every bishop in the United States. They also sent every Vocations Director a link to the website, where the 2023 report can be downloaded at no charge.

Major Points

Since 1970, the number of parishes in the United States has dropped from 18,000 to 16,579. At the same time, the number of Catholic priests has fallen even more precipitously from 59,000 to just 34,923.

Since 2014, however, the decline has accelerated. Between 2014 and 2021, there was a 9% decrease in the number of active diocesan priests. The total number of priestly ordinations declined by a stunning 24%.

Of particular concern to many bishops is the imminent mass attrition as “baby boomer” priests age and retire. “In the current state of many dioceses... a much higher rate of replacement will be necessary to secure sufficient priests to continue effective ministry,” the report states. “In such cases, within the next 5-10 years each current priest may need to inspire a replacement of two, three, or even more priests.”

Population Measurement

The data point to population size as a key indicator of a given diocese's current vocations outlook.

Tier 4 dioceses – those serving the smallest numbers of Catholics – are the highest-performing in terms of ordinations. These smaller dioceses, such as Lincoln, NE, and Tulsa, OK, ordain six times as many men per capita as Tier 1 dioceses such as Chicago, IL, and Los Angeles, CA.

The larger Tier 1 dioceses have experienced the greatest statistical decrease in vocations, making them a primary concern, since the largest number of Catholics are in this group.

The Vicious Cycle of Consolidation

Many dioceses throughout the United States have responded to financial strain (including major payouts in sex abuse settlements) and the vocations shortage by consolidating parishes.

Consolidation is a favored strategy for decline management, and it almost certainly guarantees further decline.

"Where there are large numbers of parishioners served by each priest in a diocese, the ability for a priest to build trusted relationships with families and young men showing potential for the priesthood becomes almost impossible," according to the report. "Relationships are necessary for both evangelization and the cultivation of vocations."

The report adds: *"As the number of total active priests dwindles, a direct negative impact on the cultivation of new priests is observed."*

The priest-to-parishioner ratio continues to decline, particularly in California and Texas where the influx of Hispanic immigrants tends to accelerate its effect.

"Interestingly, 14 of the 17 dioceses with the largest number of parishioners served by each priest are in California and Texas," the report notes. "The influx of Hispanic Catholics into these states over the past few decades might contribute to this. Hispanic Catholics make up more than 50 percent of Catholics in these two states. Nationwide, the official number of Catholics identifying as Hispanic is 39 percent, but the number of priests identifying as Hispanic is only 5 percent."

Other Factors

The report examines other key causes of the decline in vocations. Two events in recent years contributed to attrition among seminarians in formation.

The revelations of Cardinal Theodore McCarrick's involvement in sexual abuse scandals correlates directly to a sharp drop in the number of seminarians nationwide. *"The number of seminarians fell from 3,749 in 2017 to 3,592 in 2018 and then 3,406 in 2019."*

COVID-19 lockdowns also correlate to further declines in these numbers over the course of 2020 – 2022.

Where Priests Come From

Vocation Ministry also examined the testimonies of thousands of young priests throughout the United States regarding their own "successful" vocations. The report notes several patterns in their responses that should help drive vocation efforts in every diocese regardless of size.

Seventy-five percent of newly-ordained priests reported receiving the "call" before their 18th birthdays. When asked what first moved them to consider the priesthood, over 70% of priests indicate another priest first suggested it to them. In spite of these figures, only 30% of priests report actively inviting young men to consider a vocation.

These data points suggest there is a vast, untapped potential in Catholic dioceses that can identify eligible young men and encourage existing priests to reach out to them personally.

Hope for the Future

The report includes evidence-based recommendations for Offices of Vocations and bishops. Vocation Ministry has partnered with 50 dioceses and is seeing encouraging trends.

"Many dioceses are stuck thinking long-term recovery – maybe they hope to turn things around in the next 100 years," Gruenewald remarked. "But when a bishop invites Vocation Ministry in – we do a priest convocation and a workshop for laity – we've seen dioceses turn this trend around in three years."



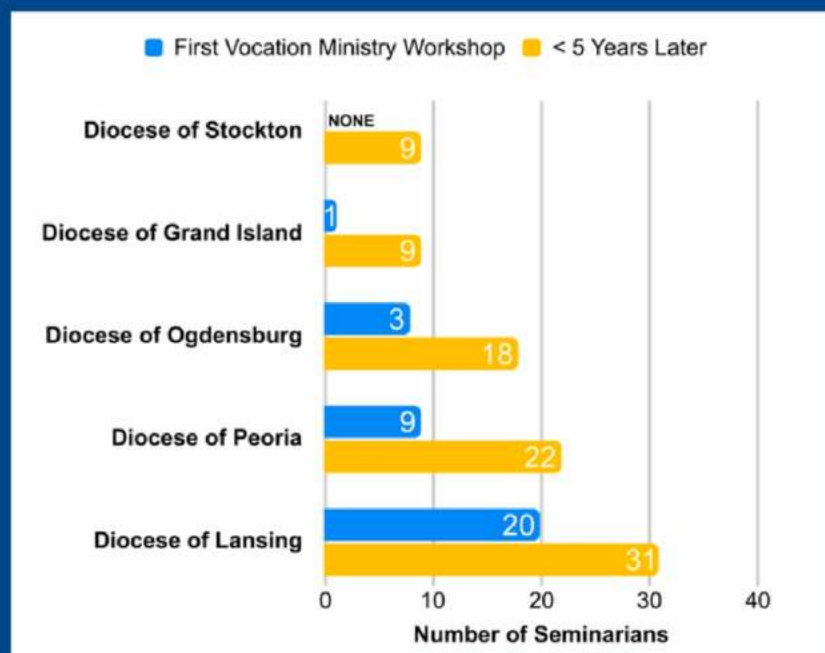
She encouraged Catholics to see the report as a starting point, not a death sentence.

"We don't have to accept the decline," she stated. "But we can't fix what we haven't measured."

The report points to stories of success – robust offices of vocations, bishops who foster father-son relationships with their priests, and strong families who talk regularly about the priesthood.

"This is a time of great graces for the Church," Gruenewald said. "And this report is our gift to the Church we love."

Our Partner Dioceses Are Reporting **INCREASES!**



Source: *"The State of Priestly Vocations in the United States," VocationMinistry.com*

Hope for the Future

Just because we recognize downward vocational trends does not mean we have to assume that continued diminishment of the priesthood is inevitable in the Church in America. Where vocation promotion is taken seriously on a regular basis, we are beginning to see an upward tick among otherwise downward trends. In fact, there are actually dioceses reporting increases in new seminarians, and we can look to them for best practices when cultivating vocations.

Recommendations for Offices of Vocations

Vocations are the fruit of a healthy parish. Developing healthy parishes in the United States is vital to our ability to recover from the decline in seminarians and ordinations. Many factors go into what it means to be a *“healthy parish,”* but there are some basic characteristics from which we can learn.

- **Holy Parishes.** Is the goal of a parish for each member to grow in sanctity? Or is it simply to have a high-functioning administration? If the goal is to grow in sanctity, a higher rate of vocations will be a natural outcome.
- **Healthy Priests.** Parish priests continually report being overworked by being too consumed with managerial duties, administrative tasks, endless meetings, and facilities maintenance. When priest personnel assignments are made, it is common practice to put the sharpest, most capable priests in large parishes. But this strategy often backfires by exhausting priests and reducing their ability to thrive, further diminishing their ability to foster vocations.
- **Holy and Focused Priests.** When a priest takes vocation cultivation seriously throughout parish life, young men receive a consistent and encouraging message to discern their future vocations. Understanding the urgent need to replace himself (in some cases three or more times) should give a priest a clear focus on vocation promotion and ministries where vocations originate (youth and young adult ministries, homeschool co-ops, altar servers, etc.).

- Creative solutions need to be found to free up priests to be priests, able to cultivate holy relationships with their parishioners. Parishioners need to see their priest praying in church or praying before the Blessed Sacrament in Eucharistic Adoration.
- Heart-Centered Religious Education. Most religious education programs are focused on systematic sacramental preparation and classroom catechesis and less focused on cultivating hearts for Christ through personal encounters with his love, which has the most significant effect on what happens to young people during Confirmation and beyond. Unlike Catholic high schools and universities given a finite amount of time to impact the lives and decisions of young people, parishes have much more time over the course of eight to ten years and are the most basic un-institutionalized means to grow vocations. If religious education and youth ministry programs could focus on more children understanding the Kerygma and fostering a personal relationship with the triune God, the vocations crisis would take care of itself within a decade.
- Holy and Healthy Laity/Families. Vocations come from families. One cannot expect a healthy crop of new vocations without the intentionality of planting seeds that can be nurtured over time. Being actively involved in a parish-based vocation ministry will not only teach a layperson how to foster vocations but give them tools and opportunities to do so.

Conclusion

The data presented in this report might be difficult for some to digest. But the point must be made...just because the trends head downward, this does not mean Catholics have to accept them as inevitable. The data does reveal that an impending crisis has already begun. But let's not let it continue. We don't have to accept the decline. We can always work to mitigate it by openness to new ideas, new solutions, and new methodologies that go beyond the status quo over the past 50 years. The Church in America - diocese by diocese - needs to commit to creating an environment where vocations can be initiated, discerned, and fostered all the way to ordination, and beyond.