

“NUMBERS DON’T LIE” STATS FOR CHURCH GEEKS

I have never tried to hide the fact that I am a “statistics” aficionado. They tell us many things, some of which are useful, perhaps even sobering for our own reflection. So I was more than a little interested in the latest edition of the Vatican statistical yearbook, known as the *Annuario Pontificio*. By the way, if I ever scored an assignment in the Vatican (fat chance), that is the one I would want! Give me an Espresso machine, an Apple computer and a garden-level cubicle, and you’ll never hear another peep out of me! A beautifully bound red copy of the Vatican’s statistical yearbook can be yours for just 75 Euro! It painstakingly compiles statistics, albeit a year or so after the fact. This year’s report is a mix of good news and some equally stark realities and trends. At the end of 2015, the number of baptized Catholics reached **1.285 billion** or **17.7%** of the global population.

As of 2016, the Catholic Church includes approximately 3,000 dioceses (in the East called eparchies), grouped into 23 particular Churches – the Latin-rite Church and 22 Eastern Catholic Churches – each with distinct traditions regarding the liturgy and the administration of the sacraments. The largest diocese in the world is the **Archdiocese of Mexico City** (approx. 7,000,000 Catholics), while the smallest is the **Diocese of Constantine (Hippo)** in Algeria with just 300 Catholic souls. The latter was once shepherded by none other than my favorite theologian, Saint Augustine himself! But here is the primary take away– the future of the Church is clearly in Africa, not in Europe or even the Americas.

Due to the Church’s expansion in Asia and Africa, new dioceses have been established, requiring new bishops. In 2016, 190 men were consecrated as new bishops, while 146 bishops died. In Africa, the growth trend is constant, while it is shown to be more contained in Asia and Oceania. The 2015 statistics reveal that the Catholic Church has 5,304 bishops (up 3.9% from 2010), including retired bishops. That’s more miters running around than ever before in history! At Vatican II, up to 2,625 active bishops participated at any one of the four sessions. But in those days most bishops remained in office until they died. There was no church law requirement to offer one’s resignation at age seventy-five. Retirement was in fact a hot topic of debate at Vatican II on November 11, 1963. One Sicilian, Archbishop Mingo of Monreale, was quite blunt: “Old age tends to tie a man still more to his office and authority, and there is great danger of self-deception. It is true that there are many men who can still govern a diocese after the age of 75, but there are many more men who cannot.” He retired at age 76 in 1978 and died two years later.

The number of priests worldwide remained mostly steady from the previous year. In 2015, the total number of priests stood at **415,656**, an **increase** of 0.83% from 2010. Of these, 281,514 are diocesan priests, while the others belong to religious orders. That may sound like a large number, but it figures to one priest per 3,091 faithful, a staggeringly high ratio to me. But sadly, the number of women religious continues to decline. Worldwide, they have decreased from 721,935 in 2010 to 670,320 in 2015, a **7.1% decrease** in five years! We now have 45,255 permanent deacons and 54,229 brothers. The number of male religious has remained steady due to the increase in Africa, while Europe and North and South America show larger decreases.

But it is the distribution of Catholics that has changed radically. For example, 100 years ago, Catholics made up about half (48%) of the world’s Christians, while being about 17% of the worldwide population. A century later, we still comprise about half (50%) of the Christians, and nearly 18% of the world’s population. But the *distribution* is significantly different and shows how the face of the Church has changed. In 1910, **nearly nine in ten Catholics** lived either in Europe (65%) or Latin America (24%)! Today, North and South America account for nearly half (49%) of all the world’s Catholics. Africa continues its remarkable growth, from 15.5% to 17.3% of the world’s Catholics in the past five years, while Europe has seen a decline, from 23.8% to 22.2%. So while in 1910, France boasted the largest numbers of Catholics in any country in the world, they now slipped to #6 and their numbers continue to plummet. Today, Brazil, Mexico and the Philippines win the Gold, Silver and Bronze medals for total numbers of Catholics. The USA comes in 4th followed by Italy, France, Columbia and Spain. But next after Spain, surprisingly, is the

Democratic Republic of Congo, with 43.2 million Catholics. More Catholics live there than in Argentina. That was unthinkable a generation ago.

But other sobering realities continue to trend. The world's Catholics are now outnumbered by Muslims. "For the first time in history, we are no longer at the top: Muslims have overtaken us," noted Monsignor Vittorio Formenti in an interview with the Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano* several years ago. He supervised the compilation of demographic figures for the *Annuario Pontificio*. He added: "It is true that while Muslim families, as is well known, continue to make a lot of children, Christian ones on the contrary tend to have fewer and fewer." No, we are not in a "competition" for membership, but the facts are indicative of what has been happening these past twenty-five years. The trends are clear. Let us continue to promote without hesitation the pro-family, pro-life Gospel within the Church, for the future vibrancy of the Church absolutely depends upon it.

- I offer heartfelt thanks to all who supported **Bishop Chad Zielinski** and the Diocese of Fairbanks this past weekend. You were most generous and this will greatly help him with the many needs of his missionary diocese. He conveyed to me personally his gratitude and I pass it along to you. And he loves Cossetta's!
- Wisdom of the saints... "Those who go often to Mass during the week, do their work very much better than those who, for want of faith, think they have no time for it" (St. John Vianney). We are all busy, but consider attending a daily Mass if you have not done so recently. You might be surprised how spiritually refreshed you will be for your other duties.
- Yesterday (Saturday), the Holy Father canonized **Sts. Francesco and Jacinto Marto** in Fatima, Portugal, a Shrine still on my to-do list. They died in 1919 and 1920, respectively. What beautiful examples of holiness for our children to emulate. Sanctity is possible for all ages.
- I consider it a highlight of my time at the Cathedral to have welcomed Archbishop Hebda by symbolically opening the Cathedral doors one year ago to at his installation Mass. His generosity is unparalleled, his energy, amazing. Above all, his deep faith, gentle demeanor and selfless example have inspired both priests and laity alike. As he leads us to the Lord, ever-moving forward in faith to a better day, may he continue to know of our prayerful support.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector