

## **“FEELING GOOD ABOUT BEING CATHOLIC” SEIZING CHALLENGES & REMAINING HOPEFUL**

For statistics aficionados who happen to be Catholic, there are resources galore available to satisfy our thirst for tangible data. The trouble is, sometime that data may not always be encouraging. Still, the facts matter and in order to be truly effective in spreading the Gospel, we would be foolish not to become familiar with the landscape. For the year ending Dec. 31, 2016, the world's 1.29 billion Catholics were served by: 5,353 bishops; 281,831 diocesan priests; 133,138 religious order priests; 46,312 permanent deacons; 52,625 religious brothers; 659,445 religious sisters; 345,743 lay missionaries; and close to 3.1 million catechists. Worldwide, the Catholic population is holding steady at about 17.7 percent of the global population. So far, so good, right? Not so fast.

According to the Vatican's statistical yearbook, in 2016 more than **16.2 million people were baptized** and **2.4 million were married** in a Catholic ceremony. But the same yearbook for 1986 had reported more than **17.8 million baptisms** and more than **4 million Catholic weddings**. Is that a meaningful difference? To put that in perspective, in 1986 the world counted 4.96 billion inhabitants. In 2016, that number had ballooned to 7.46 billion, as the world's population increases by approximately 80-90 million people per year. Thus, if the number of Catholic baptisms annually is **down by 1.6 million**, that represents a significant drop considering the growth of the world's population in the same 30-year period.

Another lens through which we view our Church's vitality is that in 2016, **17.6 children were baptized for every 1,000 Catholics** in the United States, down from 18.9 per 1000 thirty years earlier. It may seem insignificant, but clearly fewer Catholic parents are baptizing their babies and this presents a monumental challenge for evangelization. Whether or not people actively practiced their faith, one used to presume that the children of Catholics would at least be baptized. That is clearly and demonstrably no longer the case and I suspect will manifest itself even more clearly in the future. Currently, there are **1,916 Catholics per priest in the U.S.** While this is a significantly better ratio than countries such as Venezuela (9,829-to-1) or Brazil (7,976-to-1), and even better than the global average of 3,130 per Catholic, it remains a serious concern here. More and more priests are covering multiple parishes, especially in the more rural dioceses in our country. This puts tremendous strain on priests, who are unable to spend much time on Sundays with the people because they are motoring off to their next Mass.

We must carefully acknowledge and then evaluate this “slow bleed” and embark upon a plan to address it. Evangelization is obviously key, but equally important is to observe the religious practice of people and see what is drawing them. A Pew Research Center survey released in March found “no evidence of a rise in the share of Americans who identify as Catholics [22% in 2012 vs. 20% in 2017], and no indication of a Francis-inspired resurgence in Mass attendance. In surveys conducted in 2017, 38% of Catholic respondents say they attend Mass weekly. By comparison, in the year before Francis became pope, 41% of U.S. Catholics reported attending Mass weekly.” Let's be clear— “business as usual” will only result in a continued slow bleed. There is much work to do! We must look inwardly within our Archdiocese, supporting initiatives that are bearing fruit. And there truly are some great success stories in this Archdiocese.

Before I am accused of being the proverbial skunk at the garden party, my own anecdotal evidence on a much more local level is more positive. I have noticed a slight increase in Mass attendance here on a typical weekend. I believe that this is happening because people have been responding favorably to Archdiocesan leadership, to greater transparency, and a willingness to confront our problems head on, seeking honestly to do better. My fervent hope is that this will continue. It is **time to feel good again** about being Catholic, for the Church, despite its many challenges, is the Bride of Christ. We need to hold our heads high, including us priests, even as we know that the painful lessons we have learned will forever change how we approach pastoral ministry. The Church at her core is about service of God's people; it is not about power or prestige. Many Catholic bishops have sold decades old residences, choosing to live in much simpler quarters, a move applauded by clergy and laity. Now is the time to remain true to the unchanging mission of the Church, to proclaim Jesus Christ crucified and risen, and to do so in a manner that speaks to people of today in a language they understand.

In a speech delivered on 10 November 1889 in Baltimore, commemorating the 100th anniversary of the

establishment of the US. Hierarchy, **Archbishop John Ireland** spoke about the Church's outreach to immigrant groups: "Speak to them not in stilted phrase or seventeenth-century sermon style, but in burning words that go to their hearts, as well as to their minds, and in accents that are familiar to their ears." This wisdom is perennial and remains our task today. We do so, not by watering down the truths of the Gospel, but by joyfully and confidently proclaiming them in intelligible ways. The people of God deserve our best efforts to promote and protect the Catholic faith in all its integrity. The Gospel offers hope, challenge, comfort and the grace to carry on in the midst of life's struggles. The Church reaches out to the needy, the downtrodden, always extending her arms in a loving embrace, and the faithful laity will be at the forefront of its renewal. Let us move forward with eyes wide open to reality, but do so with fervent faith, animated by hopeful trust in the Lord's abiding presence in His Church.

- This parish and this beautiful church could hardly operate without the tremendous commitment of you, her members and our many welcome guests. I am so deeply grateful for your support, and we desire to express our gratitude at a Volunteer Appreciation picnic **next Sunday, June 24, immediately following the 10:00 a.m. Mass** in our courtyard. Please sign up today, either at Church or online.
- The embrace between high school players from opposing teams made national headlines. Friends since childhood, Mounds View's **Ty Koehn** struck out Totino-Grace's Jack Kocon to send the Mustangs into the State Tournament. But Ty delayed his celebration with teammates and ran to embrace his dejected friend at home plate. "It was just instincts to go up to him and let him know that the outcome of the game isn't as important as our friendship," Koehn said. Bravo!
- It was truly fascinating to watch the historic meeting between **President Trump and Chairman Kim Jong Un** in Singapore. The initial handshake at 8:02 p.m. (CDT) was followed by meetings, culminating in the signing of a broad agreement that gives reason for hope. I woke up very early last Tuesday morning to watch the press conference. Obviously, there is much work that needs to be done, especially in terms of verification, but this initial step is more than any previous U.S. administration has achieved.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,  
Rector