

## U.S. PARISH “POWER” SHIFTS: A TALE OF TWO CHURCHES

While serving in the Archdiocesan Vocations Office twenty-five years ago, I became friends with a priest who held the same position in his diocese and once paid a visit to him in **Savannah, GA**. Squarely within the Bible Belt, Savannah, Georgia had a tiny percentage of Catholics amongst its numbers. However, as was quickly evident, it was a vibrant and cohesive local Church with a unified presbyterate. As my friend explained, when in the minority, some of the **intra-mural squabbles** that plague larger dioceses, especially among its priests, were all but absent from his local church. How refreshing— sometimes we only realize what unites us when we draw closer in unity. While tallying just 77,000 Catholics in a population of 3 million—just 2.6%— yet, Savannah boasts one of the strongest priests per parishioner ratio in the country— **one priest for every 706** Catholic faithful. Compare that to this Archdiocese— one priest for every 1,884 laity and you get the picture.

What is occurring in our nation is truly a tale of two churches, both Catholic, but each very different. In an insightful article published in **America** magazine, the tale of the census data is nothing short of amazing. Data supplied by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) forms the backdrop of the article. Just consider the change in Catholic population since yours truly made his first Holy Communion in 1971. In Pennsylvania and Rhode Island, the Catholic population has **decreased by 17%, in Michigan and Vermont** it has diminished by 16%, and in Massachusetts, by 14%. Contrast that loss with the following increases in **Catholic population** by percentage: **North Carolina** (+922%), Georgia (+858%), Nevada (+635%), South Carolina (+582) and— are you ready?— Utah (+370%)! A similar pattern follows suit with respect to the number of parishes. Maine witnessed a 61% drop in the number of parishes, while Pennsylvania experienced a 36% decrease. (See U.S. Map on page 7)

So, what is going on? Actually, a combo plate of factors has coalesced to produce this anomaly. First, in the Northeast and Rustbelt, many parishes are extremely old, remnants of the ethnic enclaves that developed in the mid to late 19th century. Churches were every few blocks, sometimes even closer, one for the German speakers, the other for the Italians, and so on. Obviously, this was not sustainable as over time the demand for such Italian or German language Masses faded through a natural process of assimilation. At the same time, the decline in the past fifty years is attributable to more troubling trends besides simple demographic changes. The pervasive Catholic culture changed, city Catholics moved to the suburbs, Mass attendance rates plummeted, and core urban neighborhoods changed. Did the Church become complacent and tired?

By contrast, the south, especially the Mid-Atlantic, has seen a blossoming of technology and new arrivals from other regions of the country. In 2010, my brother relocated with his family to assume a professorship at a University in the “Research Triangle” located in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. He quipped that he was living there for three weeks before, when entering a fast food restaurant with his family, he first heard a southern accent. Everyone seemed to be from somewhere else. “Yeah, you betcha”— it’s different down there. What are the odds that the nation’s **largest catholic parish** would be in North Carolina? Well it is, and at St. Matthew’s Catholic Church in **Charlotte, NC**. The parish, which began renting space in a movie theatre in 1986 with 237 families, now boasts **10,370 registered households!** More than 600 First Communions are celebrated yearly. That’s what happens when a state grows from 1% to 10% Catholic.

We effectively have the **same number of parishes** today (16,346) in this country that we did in 1961. That was in the midst of the boom that resulted in a peak of 18,988 parishes in 1991, resulting in **2,642 fewer parishes** with little end in sight. But also consider the different picture in parts of our nation. Twenty-five states have fewer Catholic parishes than in 1971, Minnesota among them with 83 fewer parishes. See the chart in the sidebar (blue states decreased, while green increased). With the exception of Louisiana, all the southern states have grown, while very few northern states show growth. Two notable exceptions are located within our ecclesiastical province of the Archdiocese, namely North and South Dakota. It is a tale of geography. The once massive dioceses in the East have significantly contracted, while the influx of Hispanic immigrants and successful evangelistic efforts have borne fruit in the South.

The Catholic Church in this country is at a **crossroads**, and the once “powerful” Catholic centers have largely

faded in prestige and influence. The difference is experienced by the faithful in radically different ways, by what they see each and every Sunday in the pews. May we continue to strive to remain a vibrant Church, even as we face reality. I am a worrier– I worry about our Catholic Grade Schools, one reason why I am honored to serve on the **Board of Aim Higher**, a separately incorporated foundation that provides scholarships for Catholic grade school students in the Archdiocese. No, demographics do not tell the entirety of the story, but they are most instructive. We ought to pay close attention to these findings and make appropriate adjustments in accordance with these trends.

- If all goes according to plan, I will have visited the home parish of **Archbishop John Ireland** in **Danesfort, Ireland** yesterday (May 4), making my way to Our Lady of Knock Shrine on Monday. I am on a brief pilgrimage to Ireland with some members of the Saint Paul Seminary Board of Trustees. It is my first ever visit to the Emerald Isle. Despite my German surname, I am 50% Irish, with **Downey** and **Mullaney** as my two grandmothers. Thus, half of me is saved, while the other half is still up for grabs!
- It is so **tense in Sri Lanka** that the Cardinal **cancelled all Masses**, directing people to watch a broadcast of Mass celebrated at the Archbishop’s residence, rather than set foot in their churches. Fear has **gripped the nation**. Reports indicate that government officials had credible warnings of possible militant attacks, but responded to them inadequately, only adding to the tragic loss of more than 300 lives on Easter Sunday.
- Congratulations to our **First Holy Communicants**, who will receive Our Lord for the very first time at today’s 10:00 a.m. Mass. It is a joyous day in the life of every Catholic, and no matter what age, I suspect you have vivid memories of your own special day. May God bless our young people.
- In what is the latest threat to religious freedom, Chilean bishops are worried about a **new law** that would require clergy to **break the seal** of confession in order to report crimes of abuse. While aspects of the mandatory reporting law are supported, the bishops rightly insist that exceptions must be made for the Sacrament of Penance in order to “safeguard the beliefs and the consciences of people, which is one of the most fundamental human rights.”

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel  
Rector

**Net Change in Catholic Parishes by State, 1971 to 2018**

