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Pope Francis, wearing a white and gold mitre, pours water over a baby's head, as a well-dress

Pope Francis baptizes a baby during a Mass in the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican in this file photo from Jan. 8, 2023. According to the Vatican's Statistical Yearbook of the Church 2021, the Catholic Church baptized 13.7 million people in 2021, more than 81% of whom were children under the age of 7. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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As first Communion season winds down and wedding fever rises, Catholic counters are busy.

The Central Office of Church Statistics, a department of the Vatican Secretariat of State, keeps track of baptisms, first Communions, confirmations and Catholic marriages reported by dioceses around the world.

The statistics are one way of "showing adherence to the church," including the continuing practice of the faith over time, said the introduction to the chapter "Practice of Religion" in the 512-page volume, Statistical Yearbook of the Church 2021.

Using statistics reported as of Dec. 31, 2021, the book was published in February this year. It counted more than 1.3 billion Catholics in the world or 17.7% of the global population.

Dioceses and other church territories around the world reported more than 13.7 million baptisms in 2021 and more than 11.1 million of those, 81%, were baptisms of children under the age of 7. The yearbook for 1991 reported 18.1 million baptisms worldwide, 89% of which involved welcoming into the church children under the age of 7.

The statistical yearbook noted "a general downward trend in the relative number of baptisms, following closely the trend in the birthrate in most countries."

The yearbook also provided a look at the percentage of baptisms of people over the age of 7 by continent from 2016 to 2021, providing an indication that missionary activity is holding steady everywhere but the Middle East.

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Africa leads the world in the percentage of baptisms in which the new Christian was over 7 years of age. In 2016 close to 33% of the baptisms on the continent involved older children and adults; by 2021, it had grown to 36%.

Both the Middle East and Europe reported in 2016 that about 4.5% of all baptisms involved people over the age of 7; by 2021, the Middle East reported only 2.9% of baptisms involved that population, while Europe stood steady at 4.5%. North American dioceses reported 8.7% in 2016 and 8.6% in 2021.

The number of Catholic weddings celebrated around the world in 2021 was over 1.8 million; of those, only 9.2% involved a Catholic marrying a non-Catholic. On the low end, only 1.7% of marriages in Central America were between a Catholic and a non-Catholic, while in Oceania the figure was 28.3%. North America was close with 20.2 percent of all sacramental marriages involving a Catholic and a non-Catholic.

The yearbook for 1991 reported more than 3.8 million Catholic weddings with 8.9% of them involving a Catholic marrying a non-Catholic.

In 2021, the yearbook said, 8.5 million people received their first Communion, and 7.3 million people were confirmed.

In addition to listing the number of first Communions and confirmations reported country by country and continent by continent, the 2021 yearbook also gives the number of those sacraments per 1,000 Catholics in the country or region, giving a sense of how many children those Catholics are having and how they are or are not bringing their children up in the faith.

The global average was 6.2 first Communions for every 1,000 Catholics; in Asia the ratio was highest at 9.1, while the Americas were on the low end with 5.2. The yearbook said there were 7.3 first Communions per 1,000 Catholics in the United States in 2021 and 3.1 first Communions for every 1,000 Catholics in Canada.