News



Pilgrims crowd St. Peter's Square at the Vatican, May 30, 1998, Pentecost. The Vatican on May 9, 2024, promulgated the official decree establishing the Holy Year: a once-every-quarter-century event that is expected to bring some 32 million pilgrims to Rome and has already brought months of headaches to Romans. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

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The number of Catholics and permanent deacons in the world rose in 2023, while the number of seminarians, priests, men and women in religious orders, and baptisms all declined, according to Vatican statistics.

However, the Vatican's Statistical Yearbook of the Church said, 9.1 million people received their first Communion in 2023, up from 8.68 million people the previous year, and almost 7.7 million people were confirmed, up from 7.4 million people in 2022.

At the end of 2023, the number of Catholics in the world reached 1.405 billion, up 1.15% from 1.389 billion Catholics at the end of 2022, according to the Vatican's Central Office of Church Statistics, which publishes the yearbook.

This came despite a smaller growth rate in the world's population, which, for that period was 0.88%. According to the United Nations' Demographic Yearbook, the estimated mid-year world population for 2023 was approximately 8.045 billion.

The Vatican published its statistical yearbook offering data "on the life and activity of the church in the world in 2023" at the end of March.

The yearbook cautioned that its numbers were based on the information it received back from its surveys and that of 3,188 dioceses and other jurisdictions about 140 did not send information.

The number of Catholics "does not include those in countries that because of their present situation have not been included in the survey," it said, adding that it estimated that number to be about an additional 5 million Catholics. Mainland China and North Korea, for example, had no data in the yearbook.

The percentage of Catholics as part of the global and continental populations remained about the same as in 2022. Catholics represented about 17.8% of the global population at the end of 2023, it said. The highest proportion is in the

Americas with 64.2% of its population being baptized Catholic. Europe follows with 39.6% and Oceania with 25.9%. In Africa, 19.8% of the population is Catholic and the lowest proportion of Catholics by continent is Asia with 3.3%.

While the number of Catholics is increasing, the administration of the sacrament of baptism has continued to decrease worldwide, according to the yearbook. It fell from 17,932,891 baptisms administered in 1998 to 13,327,037 in 2022 and 13,150,780 in 2023. A peak was reported during the Holy Year 2000 when 18,408,076 baptisms were administered worldwide.

The yearbook said the "general downward trend in the relative number of baptisms" has been "following closely the trend in the birthrate in most countries."

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It said the ratio of infant baptisms to the Catholic population is of "great significance" because it notes differences between one country and another. While the world average is 7.4 infant baptisms per 1,000 Catholics, the highest ratios are in American Samoa (71.2), several islands in Oceania (37.7 to 21.8), followed by Burundi (23.6), Cambodia (22.3), Timor Leste (20.3) and Myanmar (20.1). The lowest ratios are in Armenia, Georgia, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Iran, Tunisia and Algeria (below 1) followed by Russia and Djibouti (1.1).

The total number of adult baptisms registered in 2023 was 2,696,521, which is about 20% of the total number of baptisms. The highest proportion of adult baptisms is in Africa (35.9%) and the lowest is in Europe and the Middle East.

The Catholic Church had 5,430 bishops at the end of 2023, an increase of 77 bishops from 2022. The majority of them are serving in the Americas and Europe.

The total number of diocesan and religious order priests decreased by 734 men to a total of 406,996, the Vatican office said. The only significant increase in the number of diocesan and religious order priests was in Africa and Asia, which was not enough to offset the declines in the Americas and Europe.

While the number of religious-order priests had increased by 297 men in 2022, the number went down to 128,254 in 2023, about what it had been in 2021. The number of diocesan priests continued to decrease globally with 278,742 men at the end

of 2023.

The yearbook also offered a chart tracking the overall change to the number of diocesan clergy from 2013 to 2023 by calculating how many of those already serving were newly ordained, minus those who died and those who left the priesthood. It showed there was modest growth from 2013 to 2016 (0.31% to 0.05%) followed by a negative rate starting in 2017 that peaked in 2020 during the pandemic (-0.73%). The rate was recorded at -0.45% in 2021 and -0.12% in 2022.

The number of Catholics per priest increased slightly to 3,453 from 3,408 Catholics per priest in 2022.

The total number of religious brothers continued to decrease in 2023 from 49,414 to 48,748 and the total number of religious women, it said, was down to 589,423 from 599,228 at the end of 2022 — a decrease of 9,805 women or 1.64%.

The number of permanent deacons continued to increase. There were 51,433 permanent deacons at the end of 2023 — a 2.54% increase over the previous year, with the highest numbers being in the Americas.

The number of seminarians continued to decrease globally with a 1.67% average rate of decline from 2018 to 2023. There were 106,495 seminarians at the end of 2023 with the only growth — 383 men — being in Africa.

The number of Catholic weddings celebrated around the world in 2023 was down from 1.97 million in 2022 to 1.85 million; of those, about 10.3% involved a Catholic marrying a non-Catholic.