

US Catholic parishes growing in size and diversity

Jerry Filteau | Feb. 18, 2011



WASHINGTON ? In just 10 years U.S. Catholic parishes have become considerably bigger and more diverse, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate reported as part of a major new study on Catholic parish life.

In 2000, just one-quarter of the nation?s parishes had more than 1,200 registered households. By 2010 that had grown to one-third. At the lower end, parishes with fewer than 200 registered households dropped from one-fourth of the nation?s total in 2000 to barely more than one in seven a decade later (24 percent to 15 percent).

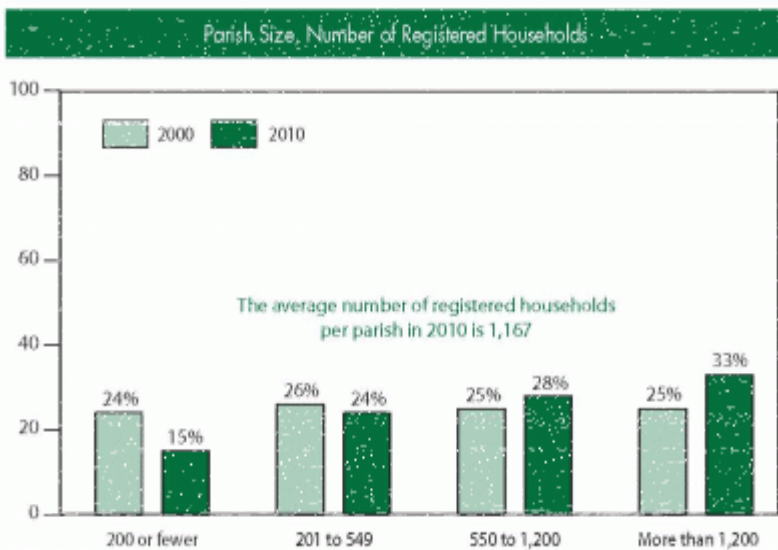
The overall average size of parishes grew 36 percent, from 855 households in 2000 to 1,167 in 2010.

[CARA](#) [1], which is based at Georgetown University in Washington, reported its findings in the winter issue of its quarterly newsletter, The CARA Report.

Mary Gautier, editor of The CARA Report, said the average size of a U.S. Catholic household is the same as the national average, 2.6 persons per household. So a parish of 1, 167 registered households would have about 3,000 registered members.

The research agency also found that:

- One third of all parishes now regularly celebrate Masses in a least one language other than English, up 50 percent from 10 years ago. Two thirds of those who offer services in another language said they have Spanish-language Masses.
- The make-up of parishes is becoming younger: ?The percentage of parishioners under the age of 40 increased from 41 percent in 2005 to 45 percent in 2010,? the report said.
- The median annual parish offering per household in 2010 was \$468, but those in smaller parishes gave much more on average than those in the largest parishes.



The figures in the CARA report were among the findings it uncovered in the first phase of the most comprehensive study of U.S. parish life since the landmark Notre Dame study in the 1980s.

That phase, completed last year, consisted of a nationwide random sample survey of pastors or other leaders of 843 parishes. Its margin of sampling error was +/-3.3 percent.

It is part of a larger CARA study, commissioned by the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project and funded by the Lilly Endowment, in which CARA is also taking an in-depth look at 60 parishes around the country -- first with a survey of parish staff, parish council members and other parish leaders, and second with in-pew surveys of parishioners.

The project is an initiative of the National Association for Lay Ministry in conjunction with four other national organizations interested in pastoral leadership and its development in Catholic parishes.

Mark Gray, director of CARA Catholic Polls and the lead researcher on the project, noted that the increase in the size of parishes over the past decade is a result of the combined net effects of a reduction in the number of parishes of 6.6 percent in the last decade and 8.4 percent growth in the Catholic population.

The study found that in just the past five years the percentage of registered parishioners who are Hispanic grew by 4 percent, while the percentage of those who are non-Hispanic white dropped by 4 percent, narrowing the spread between those two largest Catholic groups by 8 percent.

In another church trends study reported in the same issue of The CARA Report, Gray said U.S. Catholics are likely to see an even steeper rate of decline in the number of active diocesan priests in the coming 25 years than they did in the past 25.

Unless the rate of new ordinations increases, he projected that there will only be 12,500 U.S. diocesan priests in active ministry by the mid-2030s.

He said that is because such a high percentage of today's still-active active diocesan priests are already in their 60s or 70s. Fully one-third of those currently in active ministry are 65 or older.

The study analyzed ordination rates, which have held steady at just under 400 a year for the past decade, average age of ordination in recent years, and the age distribution of currently active priests.

It also factored in departures from the priesthood (about one in every 260 active priests per year in recent years)

and used actuarial tables and other CARA survey data to project how many currently active priests will die or retire over the next 25 years -- and how many of those who retire will continue in some form of active ministry, and for how long, after retirement.

CARA projected that the number of active diocesan priests will decline by one-third by 2035, compared with a drop by one-fourth over the past 25 years.

It should be noted that if the projections hold true, the decline for each quarter-century is roughly the same numerically, since one-fourth of 100 is 25, and one-third of the remaining 75 is also 25: The net result is a 50 percent drop over the full half-century.

[Jerry Filteau is *NCR* Washington correspondent.]

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