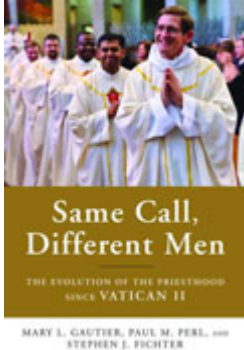


Study of US priests: Aging is 'most striking trend'

Dan Morris-Young | Mar. 12, 2012



Confirming what the U.S. Catholic community has been observing for many years -- from individuals and religious orders to dioceses and their presbyterates -- a soon-to-be released study on priestly ministry in the United States underscores that "by far, the most striking trend" is "the aging of the priesthood."

The study authors state that it is "probably the one trend that is having the most immediate impact on priestly life in the United States" today.

Effects of the aging clerical population include stressing diocesan and religious order's resources to care for aging men; younger priests being made pastors much more quickly as their older confreres age and retire; and newer priests living -- often alone -- in increased isolation from fellow clerics.

Pointing out that the average age of U.S. priests "has been increasing steadily over the last 40 years," the study reports that the median age of priests in this country today is 59 compared to 45 in 1970, an increase of 31 percent.

Meanwhile, the median age of comparably educated U.S. professionals such as doctors and attorneys has increased only 3 to 5 percent during the same time frame, notes the study, citing U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics figures.

In 1970, fewer than 10 percent of priests were over the age of 65. Now it is more than 40 percent.

Liturgical Press plans to release the study, titled *Same Call, Different Men: The Evolution of the Priesthood Since Vatican II*, in book form in April.

Carrying out their work under the auspices of the Georgetown University-based Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) in Washington, the study authors link their work to four other major studies on U.S. priestly life, beginning with 1970 research by Fr. Andrew Greeley and continued by the late sociologist Dean Hoge and associates in each of the next three decades.

The increase in priests' ages seems even more pronounced if Greeley's 1970 study numbers are used. He reported the average age of diocesan priests as 34 and he "surveyed a huge national random sample of priests

and asked them directly for their age," said one of the study's three coauthors, Mary L. Gautier, a senior CARA research analyst.

Median age of the men in the new study is 64.

The National Federation of Priests' Councils commissioned the study and an anonymous donor foundation funded it.

Using a sample of 2,400 diocesan priests and 800 religious priests, this fifth study was conducted during 2009 and 2010 and employed surveys, focus groups and individual interviews, said coauthor Fr. Stephen J. Fichter, a CARA research associate and priest of the Newark, N.J., archdiocese. The third author is Paul M. Perl, also a CARA research associate.

"It is hard to think of a profession that has changed as radically as the priesthood has during the last 40 years," Fichter wrote in an email. "In my opinion, the only group that has changed even more is the religious sisterhood."

Other findings and observations included in pre-publication sections of the study provided to *NCR* include:

- Men being ordained today tend to be older than in previous generations and have frequently earned a college degree and/or spent time in the labor force or a career before entering the seminary;
- Men being ordained today and many priests born after 1960 predominantly view Vatican II as a "historical event" more than "something they personally experienced";
- Men being ordained today define themselves more as "a man set apart" than previous generations, such as the men born between 1943 and 1960 (called "Vatican II priests"), who "were encouraged in their vocation by family members and communities who looked up to the priest as a "servant-leader" who is active in promoting social justice";
- Men ordained in the last 20 or 30 years are significantly less likely to embrace a need to consult with the laity or lay employees about parish matters than men born between 1943 and 1960;
- Men ordained in more recent times tend to stress theological orthodoxy and rate themselves happier in their priestly ministry than "Vatican II priests" and also express appreciation for episcopal and papal support more strongly;
- Priests today express concern about lack of "closeness among priests" more frequently than in previous surveys -- seven in 10 in 2009 compared to about five in 10 in 2001.

Embargoed chapters of *Same Call, Different Men* include "Challenges in Priestly Life and Ministry," "The Multicultural Reality of Priestly Ministry Today," "Effects of the Sexual Abuse Scandal" and "The Sexual Abuse Scandal and the Stories of Nine Priests."

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