

## EMPTY PEWS AND EMPTY ALTARS: A RECONSIDERATION OF THE CATHOLIC PRIEST SHORTAGE

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*Data from the Official Catholic Directory are presented in support of three arguments countering the common perception of a clergy shortage crisis in the U.S. Catholic Church, as set forth by Schoenherr and Young: demand by laity for the Church's services has sharply declined, not increased, since the 1960s; countervailing factors have greatly mitigated any reduction in services due to the decline in clergy; and in historical terms the current staffing level of clergy in American parishes and dioceses is not especially low.*

### Introduction

Over the past 20 years a series of demographic studies have labored to show that the Catholic Church is headed toward a crisis due to the declining number of ordained clergy. With dismay at what is seen as the denial of Church leaders, social scientists, led by Lawrence Young and the late Richard Schoenherr, have produced detailed studies and meticulous population projections to document the “vocations crisis” that is upon the Church.

The argument is based on an economic model of supply and demand, in which “priests are service providers and laypersons are service consumers.”<sup>1</sup> In the “religious economy” of the Catholic Church, supply (number of priests) is dropping while demand (number of laity) is rising, so that soon there will not be enough of the former to meet the needs of the latter. Schoenherr succinctly sums up the thrust of his extensive research: “The stark facts are that, while the diocesan priesthood population will have declined by 40 percent between 1966 and 2005, the lay population is increasing by 65 percent. The laity-to-priest ratio, a fairly accurate measure of supply and demand, will double between 1975 and 2005 from 1100 to 2200 Catholics per active priest.”<sup>2</sup> By 2005 he envisions a reduced cadre of only 21,000 active diocesan priests “burdened with overwork, trying to meet the sacramental and other religious demands of more than 74 million U.S. Catholics.” It is, therefore, “obvious from the data that the losses in the supply of celibate priests are approaching the crisis point. The only choice

is to staunch the hemorrhaging supply or cut back key operations.”<sup>3</sup> According to Schoenherr and Young, this dilemma presents a clear call for fundamental structural and theological changes in the Catholic priestly ministry, a call which they do not shrink from posing in stark and partisan terms. According to Young, the dilemma is “whether to reinforce male celibate exclusivity in ministry and thus reproduce the structures of patriarchy, or to reinforce the primordial tradition of eucharistic sacrifice and hierarchy of control which compose the essence of Catholicism.” He predicts that as a result of the priest shortage “in order to preserve the hierarchic sacramental priesthood the Church will need to jettison male celibate exclusivity in priestly ministry, first through the ordination of married men to the priesthood and later through the ordination of women.”<sup>4</sup> For Schoenherr the dilemma is “whether the Catholic tradition of eucharistic worship should be sacrificed on the altar of mandatory celibacy”. This conflict is “moving toward an intense ideological struggle”, he claims, because “practicing Catholics should [not] be deprived of the Mass because of the scarcity of celibate priests.”<sup>5</sup>

As Young rightly claims, “the Schoenherr-Young projections have been well received by both social demographers and social scientists who study religion.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the idea that there is a current or impending shortage of clergy has not met with any serious statistical or sociological critique, and has attained the status of common wisdom about the institutional Catholic Church. Chang states it well: “The priest shortage facing the Catholic Church is taken for granted today as a social fact.”<sup>7</sup>

Despite this, as I intend to demonstrate, the predicted clergy shortage or crisis is far from “obvious from the data”. Although repeated with vigor and unimpeachable projections of the number of priests, the terms of the argument are highly inaccurate. First, demand by the laity for the services of the church has not increased, but in fact has significantly declined, since the 1960s. Second, although the number of priests has declined almost precisely as predicted, several countervailing factors have softened the impact of that decline on services to laity. Third, in historical terms the current staffing level of clergy in American parishes and dioceses is not particularly low. I will present each of these arguments in turn, and suggest in conclusion that the trends of decline in the church do in fact suggest that the Catholic Church is undergoing a crisis, but it is an altogether different crisis than the one predicted above.

## Data and Methods

Data for this study are taken from the *Official Catholic Directory* (1898-1999). Published annually since the mid-1800s, the Directory reports from institutional records a wide variety of information about the American Catholic

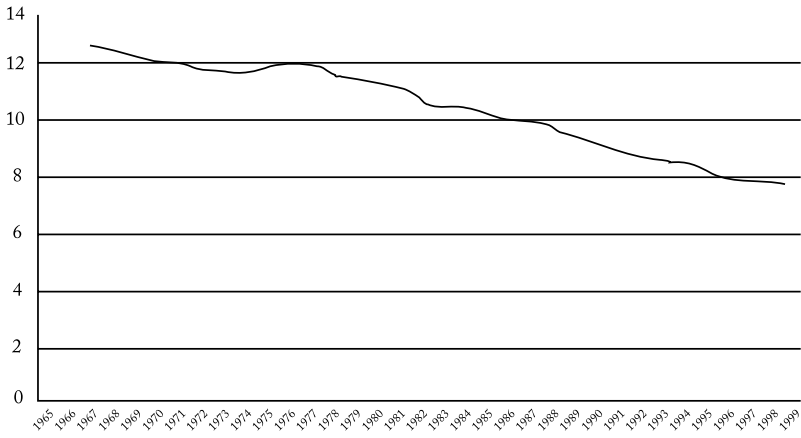
Church's activities and organizations, including the number of priests, parishes, members, and certain rituals and services. While the possibility of bias or error in institutional data is well known, the substantial reliability of these records, summarized annually from diocesan reports by the same company for over a century, is quite plausible. They represent the best data available for long-range assessment of sociological trends in the Catholic Church, and are frequently used for this purpose, including most previous studies of the clergy decline.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the data of the *Official Catholic Directory* have been shown to be highly congruent with the Schoenherr-Young projections of clergy decline. In 1998 Lawrence Young showed that the two measures varied by less than one percent through 1995, "taking this as a validation of the demographic models used in the projections".<sup>9</sup> More recently, Harris has reported that the Schoenherr-Young projections predicted the number of priests reported by the Directory in 1997 to within one-tenth of one percent.<sup>10</sup> The data of the Directory, therefore, appear particularly suited to examine the matters of interest in this study.

Records were obtained from the Directory for the years from 1899 to 1999. Data were not available for 7 years: 1905, 1910, 1935, 1951, 1952, 1957, and 1962. In addition, some fields were missing for 1909 and 1936. Pertinent information for these years has been interpolated. In addition, all figures reported are multi-year moving averages.

### Analysis

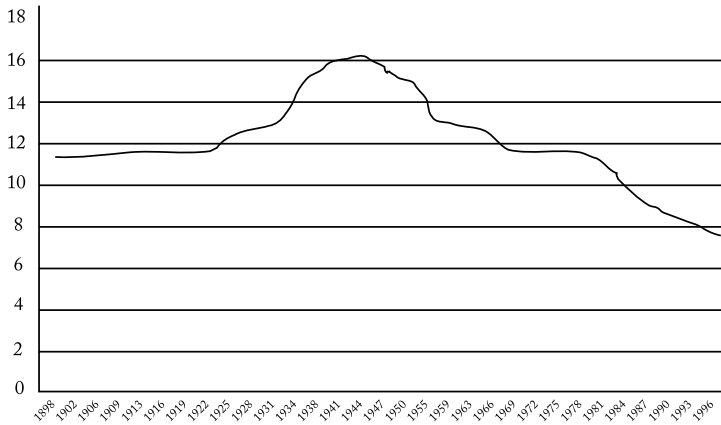
To set the issues in context, consider Figures 1 and 2. Figure 1 replicates data from Schoenherr 1993 and Hoge 1986 to show the decline in clergy since the 1960s. The measure used is the number of priests per 10,000 Catholics. At the start of the period this ratio is nearly 13; by 1999 it had declined to less than 8. For both of these major studies, this chart captures the *prima facie* evidence for the crisis of the clergy shortage. Two factors are seen as responsible for the decline: the wave of clergy resignations in the decade following the close of the Second Vatican Council in 1966, and ongoing demographic trends that keep the pool of available candidates low.

**Figure 1**  
**Priests per 10,000 members,**  
**Roman Catholic Church 1965-1999**



SOURCE: OFFICIAL CATHOLIC DIRECTORY. Shown is 3-Year moving average.

**Figure 2**  
**Priests per 10,000 members,**  
**Roman Catholic Church 1898-1999**



SOURCE: OFFICIAL CATHOLIC DIRECTORY. Shown is 3-Year moving average.

Figure 2 reports the same ratio but extends the picture backward to the turn of the 20th century. What this longer perspective suggests is not that the clergy decline is less than reported—if anything, it is worse—but that the idea that it is uniquely related to the aftermath of Vatican II is misplaced. In fact, the decline in the priest-parishioner ratio had begun at least a decade before 1965. It had dropped at a faster rate prior to Vatican II than following it. Through the mid-1980s the decline from mid-century had been at a rate and magnitude to match the increase in priest-parishioner ratio during the first half of the century. Whatever forces social and ecclesiastical that conspired to raise the ratio during the span of years preceding the war appear to have worked in the opposite direction, or been successfully countered, in the decades following it. We might think of the first 40 years as one of gradual rise, and the next 40 years as one of corresponding decline; then in the last 20 years of the century an apparently new source of decline appears. In any event, the bellwether period, if any, suggested by this longer view is not the Second Vatican Council, but the Second World War.

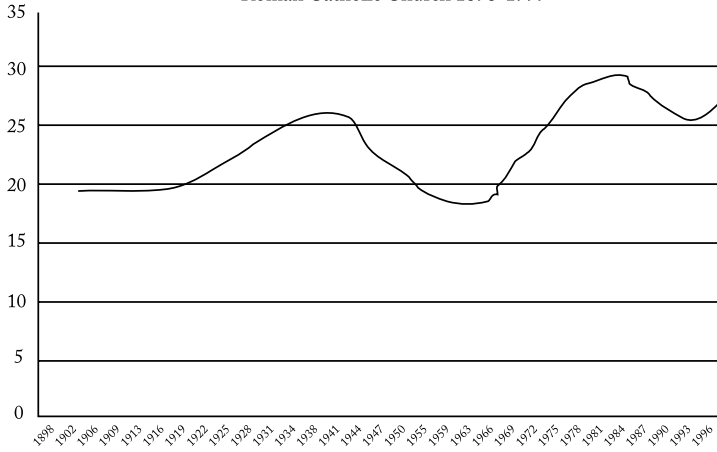
### Fewer Catholics Demand Services

Schoenherr and Young paint a picture of a greatly increased number of laity demanding services of a greatly reduced number of clergy. The increase in lay demand is as vital to their argument as the reduction in clerical supply. As Schoenherr says, “[A] component of the clergy shortage is the increased demand for priestly services produced by continuing growth in church membership.”<sup>11</sup> If demand by the laity for the services of the church has not increased or will not increase as much as they have claimed, the argument for a clergy crisis is reduced accordingly. The sole statistic that they use to estimate lay demand, however, is well known to significantly overstate lay participation in the Catholic Church.

In estimating lay “demand” Schoenherr and Young simply use the number of self-reporting Catholics in any given year, as measured by Gallup polls.<sup>12</sup> According to their model, an increase in the number of Catholics is taken to represent a directly proportional increase in the amount of services “demanded” from the clergy. This assumption is demonstrably false. The same Gallup surveys that they use, as well as highly reliable longitudinal surveys by the National Opinion Research Center, have observed that the rate of participation in the sacraments among Catholics has been declining since the 1960s, a fact which has been noted by nearly every sociological study of Catholics in the last 20 years. For example, D’Antonio et al. traced the decline in weekly mass attendance reported on Gallup polls in 5-year intervals from a high of 74% in 1958 to only 52% in 1983.<sup>13</sup> The National Opinion Research

Center's General Social Survey, which measures weekly attendance more precisely, reports consistently lower weekly attendance than Gallup in any given year, but shows a nearly identical trend of decline. While there may be more Catholics on the rolls in 1999 than in 1965, today's Catholics attend Mass and partake of other sacraments in much smaller proportions than in 1965.

Figure 3  
Priests per 10,000 weekly Mass attenders,  
Roman Catholic Church 1898-1999



SOURCE: OFFICIAL CATHOLIC DIRECTORY.  
Gallup polls 1958-1974; GSS 1972-1999. Shown as 7-year moving average.

When this decline is taken into account, the argument that the Church will lack sufficient clergy to administer the sacraments loses most of its support. Figure 3 shows the trend. In this figure the absolute number of Catholics in any given year is adjusted by the proportion in national-sample polls reporting that they attended Mass weekly (or more often). For 1958 to 1971 I used indices from Gallup polls; from 1972 to 1999, figures from the General Social Survey. Years in which this item was not measured are interpolated, and the chart reports a 7-year moving average. I do not claim that these calculations, as the data that underlie them, form a precise estimate of the number of persons in Mass in any given year, much less any week; but they do provide a reasonably reliable basis for comparison, using the best information we have. Moreover, since abundant research has shown that people consistently over-report church attendance on surveys, we can be confident that the true level of mass attendance since 1958 is lower than that reported in Figure 3. Prior to 1958, on the other hand, I estimated weekly attendance conservatively at a constant 60%; in the absence of precise data, the true rate of mass attendance was most probably higher than this. In this way, comparisons of more recent years with

those in the first part of this century are weighted against my argument, that is, against overstating the current ratio of priests to weekly mass attenders.

Despite these weightings, Figure 3 shows that the ratio of priests to weekly mass attenders has not declined, but in fact has significantly increased, since the 1960s. The ratio of priests per 10,000 weekly mass attenders rose from less than 20 in the mid-1960s to, by the early-1980s, almost 30—it’s highest level in this century, and an increase of roughly 50%. Since the early 80s it has declined slightly, but in 1999, at about 27, the ratio remains higher than at any time in the first 7 decades of the century.

One should not be misled by these numbers into thinking that there is not a serious decline in the supply of priests to minister the Eucharist; what they reveal, rather, is that the numbers of laypersons interested in receiving the Eucharist are declining at a fairly similar rate. The point they make here is simply that, relative to this unfortunate decline in lay demand, there is no shortage, much less a crisis, in the supply of clergy. As one insightful reviewer of *Full Pews and Empty Altars* put it, “Schoenherr and Young have proved that Catholic altars are becoming empty, but they do not prove that Catholic pews are full”.<sup>14</sup>

Schoenherr and Young argue that inactive Catholics should be considered a component of demand for services since “they represent a potential claim on priestly services. If the church were to honor their preference with some sort of pastoral attention, these non-practicing Catholics could not be ignored in assessing the severity of the priest shortage”.<sup>15</sup> Although it’s debatable who is not paying attention to whom, this conditional argument is no doubt correct in theory, but as an empirical matter it is clearly false. Any potential claim or offer of services notwithstanding, it is the actual demand for services made by actual Catholics that must form the basis for an objective, scientific assessment of any actual clergy shortage.

Table 1  
Sacraments per 1,000 Catholics in 1950 and 1995

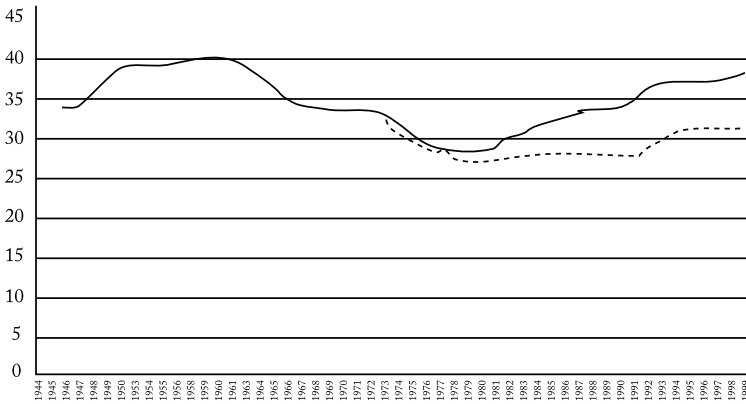
Sacraments	1950	1995	Percent change
Baptism	33.4	17.0	-49
Marriage	11.4	5.0	-56
Funeral	9.3	7.7	-17

If they make any demands on the Church at all, those who are not active in Mass attendance typically seek the services of the Church at three

points in their lives: for baptism, marriage, and to be buried. These three occasions, the “life cycle sacraments”, comprise at least the first level of added services that otherwise inactive Catholics seek from priests. But as with Eucharistic reception, the demand for these services has manifestly not been increasing since the 1960s. According to the Official Catholic Directory, following Harris,<sup>16</sup> participation rates since the 1950s have declined for all of the life cycle sacraments as well. As Table 1 shows, from 1950 to 1995, the rate (number per 1,000 Catholics) of funerals declined by 17%; the rate of marriages and baptisms were cut in half. Harris attributes the declines in baptisms and funerals to demographic changes, but is at a loss to account for the dramatic reduction in church marriages.

Figure 4

— Life Cycle Sacraments performed annually, per Priest  
 - - - - Including Deacons (since 1973)



SOURCE: OFFICIAL CATHOLIC DIRECTORY.  
 Shown as 3-year moving average. "Life cycle sacraments" comprise baptisms, marriages, and funerals.

As with Mass attendance, the decline in demand for the life cycle sacraments has outpaced the decline in the supply of priests. Figure 4 shows the number of life cycle sacraments performed annually per priest over the last 50 years. In the most recent years there have been just under 39 of these sacraments per priest performed annually; but in the mid-1950s there were over 40. Thus, while the rate has been rising since the mid-1970s, it is still slightly below its peak in the 1950s. As with the Eucharist, and considering just the supply of priests, the data do not indicate that the “baptismal right of access to the sacraments”<sup>17</sup> is in jeopardy or approaching crisis. As one recent surveillance of OCD data on priests by region and diocese concludes, “Although fewer priests are available for ministry today, the sacramental needs of Catholics continue to be met . . . .”<sup>18</sup> In fact, the availability of priests for sacraments in the late 1990s

is about the same as it was in the early 1960s. This statistic understates the true current supply of sacramental access, however, because the Church at the end of the 20th century reflects significant changes increasing lay access to the sacraments that were not present in the 1960s.

### **Deacons and Lay Staff Provide More Services**

The contribution of permanent deacons should be an obvious component of any supply-demand model of recent clergy care in the Church. As Schoenherr and Young themselves explain, “[t]he restoration of the permanent diaconate in the Catholic Church was one of the reforms following the Second Vatican Council. The church in the United States welcomed the innovation and adopted the reform in 1971. . . the church confers upon deacons the right to preach, baptize and witness sacramental marriage. . . .” Surprisingly, despite this knowledge, Schoenherr and Young refuse to consider deacons in their model. This refusal may have been due in part to the newness of this class of ordained persons in the modern church; but the reason they give is a theoretical one. In a section titled “Why Count Only Priests?”, they clearly acknowledge that “[D]eacons perform some ministerial tasks once reserved to priests and so augment clerical manpower.” But they insist on excluding deacons, they explain, “precisely because [the priest shortage] is the driving force for change in the structure of Catholic ministry”.<sup>19</sup> Apparently, even though deacons are acknowledged to be a factor on the supply side, they are not considered in part because to include them would weaken or distract from a consideration of structural changes in the priesthood.

Studies in the 1970s and 1980s often excluded deacons because their numbers were small compared to priests, few were full-time ministers, and there was some perceived lay resistance to receiving ministry from a deacon.<sup>20</sup> More recent evidence indicates, in fact, that deacons perform a significant—and increasing—amount of the practical pastoral work of the Church. Today deacons are commonly called upon to perform the most frequent sacraments in the Church besides Eucharist and Reconciliation (Confession). By 1999 there were 4 deacons for every 10 diocesan priests,<sup>21</sup> with the ratio growing higher each year. D’Antonio et al. found that, among the most committed Catholic laypersons, 64 percent said they would be willing to accept baptism, and 48 percent said they would accept marriage, performed by another lay person.<sup>22</sup> Since presumably the willingness to accept a deacon for these rites would be even higher, the felt pastoral need for a priest for these rites is not strong. In addition to performing marriages and baptisms, deacons also routinely visit the sick and preach homilies—all activities that, until 1971, fell exclusively on the shoulders of the clergy. A 1995 survey by the United States Catholic Conference found that, in their current assignments, 92% of deacons visited the

sick, 93% preached homilies, and 98% performed baptism and/or marriage liturgies.<sup>23</sup> Since deacons are fully qualified and do actively and frequently participate in providing life cycle sacraments, an accurate accounting of supply and demand for these rituals should reasonably include them.

In Figure 4 the dotted line shows the number of life cycle sacraments per clergy when deacons as well as priests are included. When all the qualified clergy are included, this ratio is much lower than when only priests are considered, and has increased only slightly from its lowest level in the 1970s. By this measure, not only is there not a crisis in the supply of the services of the Church, but the availability of qualified clergy for these commonly-demanded sacraments is greater than in the 1960s. Indeed, it is not far below the highest level it has been in this century.

### Priests per Parish

Another statistic often cited as evidence of a priest shortage is the growing number of parishes without a resident priest. The effect of the declining number of priests, we are told, will be “to dramatically increase the number of priestless parishes in the United States, already more than 2,000”; a situation which is taken as yet more evidence that “celibacy is eroding Catholicism.”<sup>24</sup> “Management choices,” Harris concludes after a survey of the clergy decline, “seem to lie somewhere between giving up the ideal of priest-as-pastor and closing one-third of the parishes in the country.”<sup>25</sup>

The assumption of this argument is that the ideal of priest-as-pastor requires a priest resident in every parish, with the implication that anything less than this is unusual, detracts from pastoral services, and is something strongly to be avoided in the Church. This assumption is worth interrogating in light of current staffing practices in the Church. But the real problem with this argument is the implication that the current level of non-resident parishes is particularly high in historical terms. In fact, just the opposite is the case.

Figure 5 reports the proportion of churches without a resident priest in the American Catholic Church annually since 1898. Because of changes in definitions throughout the century, “churches” in this figure must include both missions and parishes in order to be comparable over the entire period. As a result the amount of nonresidency reported is higher than what is measured by counting only parishes. For example, counting only parishes about 10% are without a resident priest in the most recent period; counting missions and parishes, about 20% of churches are nonresident. By this measure, up until World War II about a third of Catholic churches did not have a pastor in residence; after mid-century that proportion has gradually declined to about a fifth. As is evident, far from being unusually high, the rate of nonresidency is currently at its lowest point in the century.

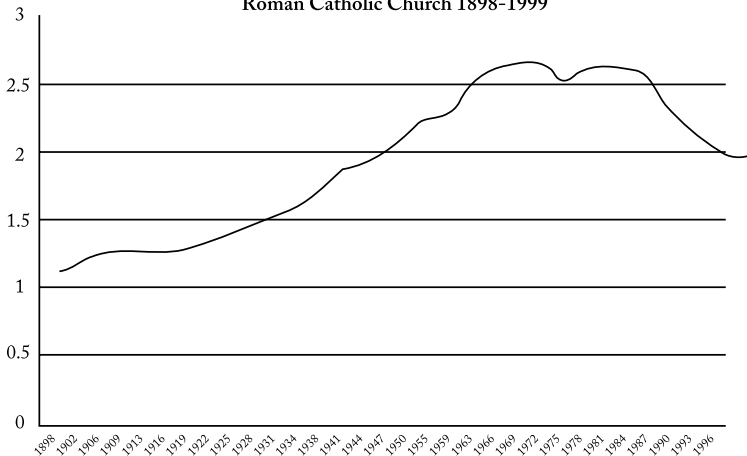
**Figure 5**  
**Percentage of churches without a resident priest,**  
**Roman Catholic Church 1898–1986**



SOURCE: OFFICIAL CATHOLIC DIRECTORY.  
 Shown as 3-year moving average. Churches include both parishes and missions.

Figure 6 reports a related statistic, the ratio of priests to parishes (not including missions), over the same period. This figure does reflect a decline from the flush days of the 1960s, when there were over 2.5 priests per parish on average. But the current level (just over 2), while lower than in the 60s, is still much higher than at any time before World War II. Although it has declined in the last few decades, it appears that by historical standards the availability of priests to parishes is not particularly low.

**Figure 6**  
**Priests per parish,**  
**Roman Catholic Church 1898–1999**



SOURCE: OFFICIAL CATHOLIC DIRECTORY. Shown is 3-Year moving average.

I do not intend in any way to suggest that the current level of “priestless parishes” is desirable, or that there is not an ideal of priest-as-pastor in the Church. On the contrary, it is clear that there is a strong preference for priests, when they are available, to pastor parishes as opposed to functioning in some other capacity. The correlation between the trends in Figure 5 and Figure 6 is  $-0.96$ . Moreover, in times when priests are in shorter supply, far fewer of them are involved in non-parochial ministries. I would also be quick to acknowledge that some regions, particularly the midwest, suffer a far greater shortage of pastors than others.<sup>26</sup> The point I wish to make is simply that, with regard to approaching the ideal of priest-as-pastor in practice, it is not possible to construe the present situation as a crisis, or even as unusually deprived. There are more priests per parish today than there were for the entire first half of this century. Counting missions, there are fewer non-resident churches than at any previous time in this century. The current situation, while certainly amenable to improvement and in some respects worse than in the 1960s, is by the standards of the past century not particularly bad, and certainly not a crisis.

These figures do not take into account, moreover, the rapidly growing involvement of lay persons in pastoral care activities that just a generation ago were largely restricted to priests. Perhaps this trend is theologically or culturally undesirable, but it is nonetheless a strong force in American church life. In 1997 Catholic parishes employed nearly 30,000 lay ministerial employees, a figure that had been growing by over 1300 per year since 1990.<sup>27</sup> As Harris notes, this comprised “more than half the professional labor pool of the American Catholic Church.”<sup>28</sup> As with deacons in regard to the sacraments, this group increasingly provides services that until recently were typically the province of priests, including parish administration, catechization, and counseling. While the effect of their contribution has not yet been estimated precisely, clearly the activities of lay professionals counteract to some extent the declining availability of clergy (and professed religious). Murnion et al., pointing out that the numeric increase in lay (and religious) parish ministers has corresponded to the rise in single-priest parishes, note that “clearly the lay/religious parish ministers are compensating for the lack of priests. . . .”<sup>29</sup> Thus the supply side of parish services is somewhat higher than is suggested by the priest-parish ratio.

## Conclusion

The supply and demand argument that the Catholic Church is suffering a crisis shortage of priests fails to convince, I have argued, because it ignores clearly documented decreases in demand and increases in supply. On the demand side, the argument fails to account for the dramatic decrease in

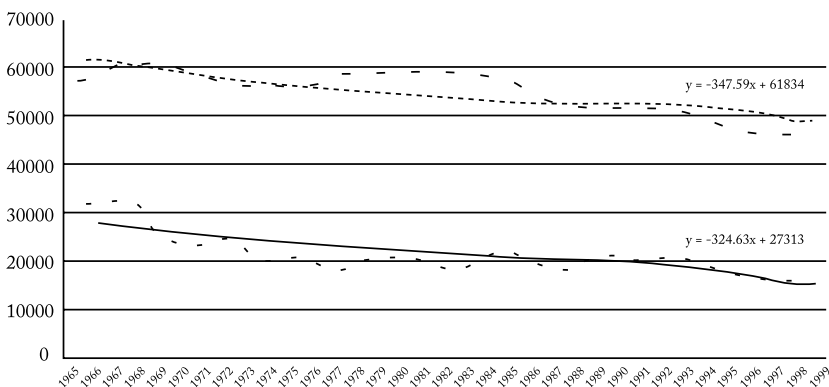
participation in the Church by laity since the 1960s, as evidenced by declining mass attendance and participation in the life cycle sacraments. On the supply side, the argument ignores the rise of the ministry of deacons and lay professionals. Furthermore, in historical terms the current ratio of supply to demand is not unusually small.

These findings in no way call into question the careful projections of clergy decline that have been made by the clergy crisis school of thought. Nor should they be taken to suggest that there is no basis or need to seek greater numbers of priests. To say that there is no crisis overall is not to deny that there are crippling shortages of priests in certain segments and geographic areas.

The implications of this evidence for our larger understanding of the Church's life are at least twofold. First, the contention that a clergy crisis provides an impetus for structural or theological change in the definition of priesthood is simply without basis. To whatever extent ordaining women or married men was seen as an answer to the problems posed by a clergy shortage, to that same extent those actions may now be seen as not necessary. Whether or not those actions are desirable on other grounds is a matter beyond the competence of this study.

Second, my findings suggest that the decline in the clergy is not due to social forces that uniquely affect priests, but is only one symptom of a more general socioreligious trend in the Catholic Church. The clergy decline is not in itself a problem only because it is part of a more widespread problem of general decline in the Church. In this sense, the absence of a clergy crisis is a much more serious problem than the presence of one.

Figure 7  
Decline in Priests and Mass Attendance Compared



SOURCE: OFFICIAL CATHOLIC DIRECTORY. Shown is 7-Year moving average.

This suggestion is bolstered by a comparison of the decline in priests with the decline in weekly mass attenders since the 1960s. Figure 7 shows the trends. The top set of data points reports the number of priests, the bottom set the number of weekly mass attenders, reported in 1,000s in order to scale the trends together for comparison. The lines in the figure are ordinary least squares regression lines for each set of data; the regression equations are reported on the chart. One can see by inspection that the unstandardized slopes of the two trend lines are very similar; the numbers are within 7% of each other.<sup>30</sup>

Despite rising formal affiliation, regular worship and sacrament participation in the Catholic Church has declined at a rate virtually identical to that of membership in the priesthood. Beyond explaining why there is not a clergy shortage, this fact also suggests that similar causes may underlie the two declines. Taken together they provide further evidence of the well-known general decline in religious practice in the Catholic Church. Ordination (conceived either as initiation or persistence in the ordained state) and regular mass attendance indicate widely varying levels of behavioral commitment to religious ideals. (So does, in a different way, reception of the life cycle sacraments, which as we saw above has declined as well.)

Supply and demand in economic models is usually mediated and balanced by changes in cost; and in this case it appears that both (potential) priests and (potential) worshippers are fairly equally less willing to pay the behavioral costs of belief than formerly. This congruence indicates that the Church finds itself with fewer priests—and fewer worshippers—not as a result of opposition to a matrix of social factors that uniquely affects priests, but as a result of its susceptibility to factors that affect both clergy and lay alike. In this sense they are correct who see in the priest decline signs of a larger “crisis of faith”.<sup>31</sup>

This kind of crisis is much more serious than a shortage of priests; yet if it is more than something confined to the clergy, it is also more than something confined to the Church. A general decline in traditional religious practice in the industrialized world is one of the most common, if not entirely uncontroversial, findings of the sociology of religion of the last few decades. The crisis of faith of which the clergy decline is an indication, this suggests, is not a crisis unique to the Catholic faith in particular, but of faith *sui generis*, that is, the cultural practice of faith in general. What has diminished, in other words, is not the substantive power of the particular ideals of the Catholic faith, or even the level of personal belief in them, but the tendency or perceived necessity in American society for any religious belief to find expression in institutional practice. In accord with the diverse theories regarding this more general decline, then, the evidence of this paper may be taken variously as an indication

of: the maturing and cultural assimilation of American Catholicism (Stark); the corrosive effect of cultural pluralism on definite religious belief (Berger); an ongoing secularizing (of behavior, not belief) trend in Western culture (Wuthnow); the increasing privatization of belief; or some combination of these. Whatever the larger social trends in play, they are, however, just that: larger social trends, and not unique defects in the Church's institutional structure or theology. They signify a (cultural) shortage of faith, not a (institutional) shortage of priests.

## Notes

1. Richard A. Schoenherr and Lawrence A. Young, *Full pews and empty altars: Demographics of the priest shortage in United States Catholic dioceses* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 18, 126-143.
2. Richard A. Schoenherr, "Numbers Don't Lie: A Priesthood in Irreversible Decline," *Commonweal* (7 April, 1995):11-14. See also Schoenherr and Young, *Full Pews and Empty Altars*, xvii.)
3. Schoenherr, "Numbers Don't Lie", 12.
4. Lawrence Young, "Assessing and Updating the Schoenherr-Young Projections of Clergy Decline in the United States Roman Catholic Church," *Sociology of Religion* 59(1998): 9.
5. Schoenherr, "Numbers Don't Lie", 13.
6. Young, "Assessing and Updating the Schoenherr-Young Projections," 1998.
7. Patricia M. Y. Chang, "Introduction: The crisis is about control: Consequences of priestly decline in the U.S. Catholic Church," *Sociology of Religion* 59(1998): 1-5.
8. Dean R. Hoge, *The Future of catholic leadership: Responses to the priest shortage* (Kansas City, Mo: Sheed and Ward, 1987). Schoenherr and Young, *Full pews and empty altars*. Young, "Assessing and Updating the Schoenherr-Young Projections," 1998.
9. Young, "Assessing and Updating the Schoenherr-Young Projections," 1998, 7.
10. Joseph Claude Harris, "Supply, Demand and Parish Staffing," *America* 97 (April 10, 1999): 16-20.
11. Schoenherr, "Numbers Don't Lie", 12.
12. In fact, they compare membership figures from the Directory with those from the Glenmary Research Center and from Gallup polls, concluding that the latter, somewhat larger figures are the more accurate, ignoring the proportion inactive that they report.
13. William V. D'Antonio, *American Catholic laity in a changing church* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1989), 44.
14. Benton, Johnson, "Book Review of Schoenherr and Young, *Full pews and*

- empty altars*”, *Social Forces* 75(1997): 1498-1499.
15. Schoenherr and Young, *Full pews and empty altars*, 308.
  16. Harris, “Supply, Demand and Parish Staffing.”
  17. Young, “Assessing and Updating the Schoenherr-Young Projections,” 1998, 8.
  18. Bryan Froehle and Mary Gautier, *Catholicism USA: A Portrait of the Catholic Church in the United States* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 123.
  19. Schoenherr and Young, *Full pews and empty altars*, 16.
  20. David C. Leege, *Parish Life among the Leaders*, Report No. 9, Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life (Notre Dame, Ind: Institute for Pastoral and Social Ministry, 1986). Hoge, *The Future of Catholic Leadership*. Dean R. Hoge, Jackson W. Carroll and Francis K. Scheets, OSC, *Patterns of Parish Leadership: Cost and Effectiveness in Four Denominations* (Kansas City, Mo: Sheed and Ward, 1988).
  21. The 1999 Official Catholic Directory reports 12,675 permanent deacons and 31,370 diocesan priests in the Church, or 40.4% as many deacons as diocesan priests.
  22. William V. D’Antonio, J. D. Davidson, D. R. Hoge and R. A. Wallace, *Laity American and Catholic: Transforming the Church* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1996).
  23. States Catholic Conference, *Survey of Deacon Supervisors*, Principal Investigators Bishop Dale J. Melczek, Reverend Eugene Hemrick, Dr. James R. Kelly, Deacon Samuel M. Taub. (Electronic Data File: American Religion Data Archive, www.thearda.com, 1996).
  24. “Editorial: Costs of clerical celibacy are rising,” *National Catholic Reporter* (September 3, 1999).
  25. Joseph Claude Harris, “The church and its choices if the priest shortage continues,” *National Catholic Reporter* (September 3, 1999): 18.
  26. The proportion of parishes without a resident pastor varies widely, from a high of 33% in the Upper Plains Region to only 4% in New England. In general, priestless parishes are most common in the midwest and much rarer along the east coast and mountain regions of the United States. For complete data by region see Froehle and Gautier, *Catholicism USA*.
  27. Joseph Claude Harris, “Creeping Democracy in the U.S. Church” *National Catholic Reporter* (January 21, 2000): 34-36. See also Harris, “Supply, Demand and Parish Staffing,” and Philip Murnion, David DeLambo, Rosemary Dilli, and Harry Fagan, *New Parish Ministers: Laity and Religious on Parish Staffs* (New York: National Pastoral Life Center. 1992).
  28. Harris, “Creeping Democracy”.
  29. Murnion, *New Parish Ministers*, 21.
  30. That is, -324 (the weekly attenders trend slope) is 93% of -347 (the priests trend slope). Standardized comparisons and tests of significance are not

appropriate since neither of these variables represents a sample and no claim is made regarding equal variances. Nonetheless, such statistics also indicate a high degree of similarity: the beta for the weekly attenders trend is  $-.8$  and for the priests trend is  $-.93$ . The correlation between the two variables is  $.64$ .

31. Pope Paul VI, "Sermon on December 30, 1976 (Vocation Sunday)", cited in Hoge, *Future of Catholic Leadership*, 17. Pope John Paul II, "Sermon on May 10, 1981," cited in *The Conclusive Document: Statement of the International Congress of Bishops on Vocations, May 1981* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1984), 13. "Celibacy defended in synod's report to pope," National Catholic Reporter (November 5, 1999), quoting the Final Report of 1999's European Synod.

