

The Barren Fig Tree

A look at the severe decline in priestly vocations in the US northeast

by Jeff Ziegler

As Catholics in many parts of the United States mourn parish closures because of priest shortages, the world's priestly vocation boom is an underreported story. According to the Vatican's statistical yearbook, the number of major seminarians worldwide rose from 63,882 in 1978, when John Paul II was elected pontiff, to 115,919 at the beginning of 2008—an increase of 81 percent, far outstripping world and Catholic population growth. During the same time period, however, the number of seminarians in the United States fell from 14,998 to 5,029, according to statistics published in *The Official Catholic Directory*—a decline of 66 percent.

Nonetheless, many of America's dioceses are taking part in the worldwide vocation boom. The number of diocesan seminarians in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis more than doubled from 63 in 2003 to 148 in 2008—the highest number in the nation. The Diocese of Lincoln, with 43 seminarians and 93,989 Catholics in 2008, remains the nation's most vocation-rich diocese, with a ratio of one diocesan seminarian for every 2,186 Catholics, a statistic that does not include the 54 religious-order seminarians who live in the diocese but will be ordained for the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter.

Overall, the nation's 20 most vocation-rich dioceses in 2008, based on statistics published in *The Official Catholic Directory*, were Lincoln, Tyler (Texas), Duluth, Wichita, Tulsa, Steubenville, Rapid City (South Dakota), Alexandria (Louisiana), Bismarck, Nashville, Mobile, Fargo, Memphis, Owensboro (Kentucky), Amarillo, St. Paul and Minneapolis, Covington (Kentucky), Lexington (Kentucky), Lafayette (Indiana), and Sioux Falls (South Dakota).

Some of these dioceses, such as



Bishop Timothy A. McDonnell at St. Michael's Cathedral in 2004, following his installation as the eighth bishop of Springfield, Massachusetts. His predecessor, Bishop Thomas L. Dupré, retired before allegations were made public that he had sexually abused two minors.

Lincoln and Wichita, have vocation-friendly cultures that date back decades. Others have been blessed in recent years with new bishops who have a knack for attracting seminarians.

In 2008, Las Vegas was the nation's most vocation-poor diocese, ranking 176th with a ratio of one diocesan seminarian for every 175,000 Catholics. Overall, the nation's 20 most vocation-poor dioceses were Las Vegas, Rochester, San Diego, Honolulu, New York, Los Angeles, El Paso, Dallas, Metuchen (New Jersey), Rockville Centre (New York), Tucson, Laredo (Texas), Orange (California), San Bernardino, Santa Rosa (California), Fall River (Massachusetts), Manchester (New Hampshire), Detroit, Brooklyn, Buffalo, and Hartford.

Location plays a role in fostering or discouraging priestly vocations: in

general, men in the South and rural Midwest are more likely to become seminarians than men in other regions of the country, with the Dakotas, Tennessee, and Kentucky being mother lodes of priestly vocations. There are exceptions: men in vocation-poor Louisville, led by Archbishop Thomas Kelly from 1981 to 2007, were eight times less likely to be diocesan seminarians in 2008 than men who lived in Kentucky's three other dioceses.

On the other hand, men in the Southwest, southern California, and the Northeast are less likely to become seminarians than men in other regions of the country, again with exceptions: Oklahoma and the Texas Panhandle are vocations-rich, and a Catholic in the Diocese of Fresno is over four times more likely to become a seminarian than a Catholic in San Bernardino or Los Angeles.

The Southwest's low ratios of diocesan seminarians to Catholics can be explained in part by local increases in Catholic population: between 2003 and 2008, the number of Catholics in the Diocese of San Bernardino grew from one million to nearly 1.22 million.

THE DE-CATHOLICIZATION OF THE NORTHEAST

The same cannot be said of the Northeast. Mirroring the oft-told story of the closure of Catholic institutions is the untold story of a more serious decline: the recent departure of over a million baptized Catholics. While the number of Catholics nationwide grew from 66.4 million in 2003 to 67.1 million in 2008, the number of Catholics in the Northeast fell by 1.15 million, from 20.7 million to 19.5 million, even as the Northeast's total population rose from 53.2 million to 55.1 million. In 2003, the Northeast was 39 percent Catholic; just five years later, it was only 35 percent Catholic. The nation as a whole was 23 percent Catholic in

2003 and 22 percent Catholic in 2008.

Amid the decline in Catholic population, the dioceses of the Northeast have a disproportionately difficult time attracting seminarians. The typical American diocese has one seminarian for every 14,300 Catholics; only five Northeastern dioceses have above-average success in attracting vocations. In 2008, the Diocese of Springfield (Massachusetts) was the United States' 64th most vocation-rich diocese, followed by Paterson, New Jersey (69th), Harrisburg, Pennsylvania (77th), Altoona-Johnstown, Pennsylvania (80th), and Newark (81st). Three other northeastern dioceses (Erie and Allentown, Pennsylvania and Ogdensburg, New York) are treading water, as it were, with ratios of seminarians to Catholics slightly below the national average. The other 24 dioceses of the Northeast are drowning.

"Among the reasons for the impeded discernment of vocations in this region is what I call a 21st-century, Northeastern, New England, aggressive, competitive, breakneck pace of life," says Father Jim Mazzone, vocation director for the Diocese of Worcester, Massachusetts (ranked 143rd). "There exists a fierce drive to succeed, and this success is measured by wealth. Both the trajectory and the target are spiritually dangerous. They pierce the vital components of discernment: silence, stillness, prayer, and reflection."

"Rhode Island is a very liberal and secular state; however, we are pleased that Christ continues to call men to the priesthood from our area," says Father Michael Najim, vocation director of the Diocese of Providence (ranked 141st), which had 27 seminarians in 2003 and 21 in 2008; the number has since fallen to 19. "Most dioceses are facing challenges in the effort to help men answer the call to serve Christ and his Church. The quality and faithfulness of seminarians is far more important than the number of seminarians. We are blessed with 19 faithful men who are wholly committed to their vocation."

Father Luke Sweeney, vocation director of the Archdiocese of New York (ranked 172nd), told CWR in 2007:

We live in the capital of the world, as Pope John Paul II said, and we are swimming upstream when it comes to promoting vocations in such a secular and materialistic culture and society. Commitment, a life of loving sacrifice, and doing things from the perspective of eternity rather than

Wall Street cut against the air we breathe. New York is a tough nut to crack, even for such groups as the CFRs (Franciscan Friars of the Renewal) and the Sisters of Life who do well nationally and internationally, but not as well in New York City.

"These spiritual dangers, of course, are not exclusive challenges to the Northeast, but they have had a strong foothold for decades," adds Father Mazzone. "I wrestled with them during my own high school years in the early 1980s. However, the opponent has grown to Goliath proportions. The Davids of today who faithfully discern their vocations slay with silence and stillness, while fervently praying to know God's will. They may be fewer in number today, but I thank God that they still exist."

One vocation director attributes his diocese's low number of vocations to a "cautious" attitude toward accepting foreign-born seminarians. Immigrant Catholics are a particularly important source of vocations: according to a March 2010 survey conducted by Georgetown's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, "between 20 and 30 percent of ordinands to diocesan priesthood for each of the last 10 years were born outside of the United States," with the largest numbers in 2010 hailing from Mexico, Colombia, the Philippines, Poland, and Vietnam. The typical immigrant priest who was ordained in 2010 is a 38-year-old who moved to the United States in 1999, five years before entering seminary.

"If you look at vocations in the Northeast, you will find that many of them are not native to that diocese but from other countries," says Father Randall Vashon, vocation director of the Diocese of Metuchen (ranked 168th). The diocese, he says, "has been cautious in embracing that source of vocations although it is certainly part of our efforts. That is undoubtedly one reason why our number is not higher."

Despite the challenges faced by the Church in the Northeast, the region is not vocation-poor everywhere. The Archdiocese of Newark under Archbishop John Myers enjoys the highest ratio of seminarians to Catholics among the nation's 13 dioceses with over one million Catholics. In 2008, the archdiocese had 104 seminarians—second only to St. Paul and Minneapolis. In four of the past six years, the archdiocese's ordination class was the largest in the United States.

The Diocese of Springfield (Massachusetts), the northeastern diocese with the highest ratio of Catholics to seminarians, illustrates how a new bishop and vocation director can attract seminarians. In 2003, the diocese had 10 seminarians; the following year saw the resignation of Bishop Thomas Dupré and his indictment on two counts of child rape. Bishop Dupré's replacement, Bishop Timothy McDonnell, appointed a new vocation director (Father Brian Dailey), and over the next four years the number of seminarians rose to 22.

Likewise, the Diocese of Paterson, led by Bishop Frank Rodimer since 1978, had only six seminarians in 2003 and was one of the most vocation-poor dioceses in the nation, ranking 168th. Bishop Arthur Serratelli succeeded him in 2004, and the number of seminarians grew exponentially to 39 in 2008.

"We have encouraged prayer by everyone, especially prayer before the Blessed Sacrament," the bishop told CWR in 2008. "Where Jesus is loved and adored in the Eucharist, vocations follow. Also, we take every opportunity to speak about vocations and to invite young people to listen to God, who has a special call for each of them. Among the priests, we have tried to build up a stronger sense of priestly identity and joy. Our priests work hard and are generally happy. Ultimately, we trust in God. He will not be outdone in generosity."

Father William Waltersheid, secretary for clergy and religious life in the Diocese of Harrisburg, attributes his diocese's relative success in attracting vocations to the leadership of Bishop Kevin Rhoades, who led the diocese from 2004 until his recent appointment as bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Indiana. "The reasons for our increase of seminarians in the Diocese of Harrisburg," he says, "[are] a bishop who made vocations a priority, a full-time priest vocation director, an organized program that promotes a culture of vocations, all the priests of the diocese promoting vocations, an example of a happy, fulfilled priesthood among the priests, [and] laity who support and love priests."

THE POOREST OF THE POOR

No other northeastern diocese has faced greater challenges in recent years in attracting diocesan seminarians than has the Diocese of Rochester. According to statistics published in the *Official Catholic Directory*, the ratio of diocesan

seminarians to Catholics in Rochester ranked the diocese 167th in 2003, with a steady decline to 175th in 2008. A Catholic in the Diocese of Lincoln, Tyler, Duluth, or Wichita was 50 times more likely to be a seminarian in 2008 than a Catholic in the Diocese of Rochester. Closer to Rochester, a Catholic in the Diocese of Ogdensburg or Erie was 10 times more likely to be a seminarian than a Catholic in the Diocese of Rochester.

Like some northeastern dioceses, the Diocese of Rochester has also experienced a steep decline in the number of Catholics. According to statistics published in the *Annuario Pontificio* and the *Official Catholic Directory*, the number of Catholics in the diocese fell from 450,000 in 1970, to 393,000 in 1990, to 314,000 in 2008, even as the overall population of the counties in which the diocese is located rose from 1.21 million in 1970 to 1.49 million in 2008. Thus, the area went from being 37 percent Catholic in 1970 to 21 percent Catholic in 2008.

To understand better the factors that have made the Northeast the most vocation-poor region in the United States, CWR examined in greater detail the factors that have contributed to the dearth of seminarians in the Diocese of Rochester, led by Bishop Matthew Clark since 1979.

"The Northeast is losing a lot of its younger population to bigger cities that have better-paying jobs, better weather, and greater populations of young people," said Dave Kelly, the Diocese of Rochester's associate director of stewardship and communications. "Many of our college students are moving to other places after they graduate. Obviously, this is an audience that might be interested in a career as a priest, so that hurts the Northeast, including the Diocese of Rochester."

"There was no general consensus [among diocesan officials] on why the Diocese of Rochester has continually ranked so low," Kelly added. Citing a recent rise in the number of seminarians, Kelly added that chancery officials "believe that the Diocese of Rochester is moving in the right direction. Events like World Youth Day and the National Catholic Youth Conference have been very helpful in reinforcing the message that we need young people to come forward and make a difference in their Church. The Diocese of Rochester has strengthened its vocations efforts by stepping up its youth ministry efforts,

while continuing to share the benefits of joining the priesthood."

In addition to asking for comments from diocesan officials, CWR sought the perspective of local priests, lay pastoral leaders, and youth ministers on the one hand, and local Catholic writers, bloggers, and laity affected by parish closings on the other. The latter were much more willing to offer comment than the former.

Like Kelly, Anne-Marie Brogan, a laywoman who serves as pastoral administrator of a Rochester parish, attributes the dearth of priestly vocations to demographic shifts. "It seems to me that a lot



A statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus on the grounds of Sacred Heart Cathedral in Rochester, New York.

of young people leave this area either to study or after they graduate, perhaps [due to] the pull of better weather or more jobs," she said. "For this reason, we—a city-center church—try to put extra effort into including young people, especially young professionals, in the life of our parish community."

Other local lay Catholics told CWR that dissent from Catholic teaching, deficient catechesis, school closings, and a new model of parish leadership have all played a part in making Rochester the region's most vocation-poor diocese.

"The Diocese of Rochester is known throughout the nation as one of the most liberal and modernist dioceses, where there has been a collapse of authentic Catholic catechesis and a policy of deliberately devaluing the priesthood in favor of the feminization of the liturgy and promotion of lay ecclesial ministries," says James Likoudis, who served as president of Catholics United for the Faith from 1988 to 1994. "Roch-

ester is the diocese where the architect of the sexual revolution in the Church (Father Charles E. Curran) remains a 'priest in good standing' despite his continuing to shred Catholic moral theology."

Likoudis' website (credo.stormloader.com) includes doctrinal critiques of presentations by diocesan officials. The group of Catholics who write for *Cleansing Fire* (cleansingfiredor.com), a blog devoted to the diocese, also documents their concerns about catechesis and the liturgy, posting parish bulletin excerpts and audio clips.

An open letter signed by 35 Rochester priests in 2004 lends credence to lay Catholics' claims of widespread dissent. Joining 23 Chicago priests, the Rochester clerics protested the "vile and toxic language" used by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in a 2003 Vatican document on homosexual unions.

In this climate, young men interested in the priesthood shy away from the diocese, according to some local Catholics. "There is a fear among some young men that the bishop will reject them, so they don't even bother to test out their calling," said one. "I know young men afraid to put their names out there for the diocese while Bishop Clark is yet in office on account of their orthodoxy," adds another. "Some will go to other dioceses or religious orders and a few might just wait two years, but the process is not a friendly one."

In a 1997 article that appeared in *New Theology Review*, Bishop Clark—whom a blogger at *Cleansing Fire* took pains to praise for his gentleness and kindness—candidly discussed his concerns about certain areas of Catholic teaching and discipline:

How can a local bishop faithfully serve the People of God entrusted to his care when in his and their judgment our insistence on the discipline of priestly celibacy has resulted in a dearth of vocations which may deprive the faithful of the nourishment of the Eucharist? Why cannot competent lay men and women, associated intimately with their pastors in ministry and teaching, be allowed to preach at the Eucharist? ... As true vicars of Christ who represent the Great Church to the local church, how can [bishops] be asked credibly to defend among their people policies to which they have not contributed and texts which they have never seen? ... Why is the diaconate,

called a “source of all goodness” and a “servant of the mysteries of Christ and the Church,” reserved to men alone? Why does the Magisterium seem to say that all are called to holiness but only men may symbolize that holiness to the community?

In late 2005, as the Vatican reiterated the Church discipline barring the ordination of men with homosexual inclinations, the bishop demurred. “The fundamental concern of formation for a life of celibate chastity is for sexual maturity, not sexual orientation,” he wrote. “Good seminary formation needs to provide an environment in which both heterosexual and homosexual candidates can grow to commit themselves wholeheartedly, even joyfully, to chaste and faithful celibacy.”

The closing of Catholic schools in the diocese has also contributed to the Rochester vocation crisis, according to several local Catholics. “One factor that we are seeing here on the ground is the threatened closure of our Catholic school,” says a parishioner at a parish that is fighting its closure. “Catholic schools are a vital avenue through which vocations are secured. If children are not being exposed to the faith in their daily lives, are not being taught and mentored by clergy, religious, and the faithful, then how can we expect that they will consider the priesthood?” Catholic school enrollment in the diocese declined 39 percent between 1998 and 2008, as 15 schools closed their doors.

As parishes also close—between 1970 and 2008, the number of Rochester parishes fell from 190 to 136—the diocese has pioneered a novel model of pastoral leadership in which pastoral administrators govern while priests serve under their leadership as “sacramental ministers” or “assisting priests.” Bishop Clark has even written a book outlining this model and its implementation in the Diocese of Rochester, titled *Forward in Hope: Saying “Amen” to Lay Ecclesial Ministry* and published last year by Ave Maria Press. A search of parishes listed on the diocesan website found that 15 non-priest pastoral administrators currently govern 27 parishes; 11 of the 15 are nuns or laywomen, one is a layman, and three are deacons. A pastoral administrator who governs two parishes—Sister Joan Sobola—is lauded on the Women’s Ordination Confer-

ence website as a pioneer proponent of women’s ordination. (Sister Sobola did not respond to a request to comment for this article.)

It is difficult to reconcile this model of parish leadership with the discipline of the Church. Authoritatively interpreting Canon 517, which permits deacons and others to have “a share in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish,” eight Vatican dicasteries made clear in a 1997 document that sharing in the exercise of pastoral care is not tantamount to governance and that “directing, coordinating, moderating, or governing the parish” is reserved to the parish priest alone.

“The entire concept of the pastoral administrator as implemented in the Diocese of Rochester is killing vocations,” says one lay Catholic. “The pastoral administrator directs pastoral care, pushes around priests, takes a directive role in worship, administers certain sacraments, delivers the homily, wears an alb, processes in with the priest and deacon, and sits next to the priest in the sanctuary. This creates confusion among the lay faithful about the role of pastoral administrator versus the role of priest. It also serves to discourage young men

from answering the call. Very few men who possess any masculinity wish to be placed under the administration of a lay administrator.”

“When a priest becomes only a ‘sacramental minister’ and deacons or lay people do everything else, it makes the calling to the priesthood [appear to be] of little importance in the life of the Church,” adds another parishioner of a parish threatened with closure. “The priest isn’t a leader anymore. He’s only another cog in the wheel.”

“Our priests aren’t allowed to be fathers,” adds another layman. “Priests must be careful about what they say. They are often at the mercy of women administrators.”

In 2003, few could have foreseen that the Dioceses of Springfield and Paterson would become the most vocation-rich dioceses in the Northeast. “John,” the administrator of the Cleansing Fire blog, is hopeful that priestly vocations will blossom again in Rochester. “We have faith, and we know that all things will be turned to the greater good, given enough time and prayer.” ■

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