

New report shows there are more Catholics, yet fewer receiving sacraments

by [Cathy Lynn Grossman](#)

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(RNS) A new report mapping the Catholic Church's more than 1.2 billion souls—on track to reach 1.64 billion by 2050—holds some surprises.

And not all bode well for the church's future as it faces major demographic and social shifts.

"Global Catholicism: Trends & Forecasts," released Monday (June 1) by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, looks at seven regions of the world.

The focus is on "the three most important indicators of 'vitality' for the Catholic Church ... the number of Catholics, the number of parishes, and the number of priests."

Among the key findings:

1. The global Catholic population has grown by 57 percent since 1980.

It's up from 7.83 million in 1980 to 1.2 billion. However, this growth varies steeply by region.

Europeans are rapidly shedding the continent's historic Catholic identity while the Global South, particularly Africa and Asia, booms with Catholics.

Europe saw only a 6 percent increase—from 271 million to more than 289 million. Meanwhile, the number of Catholics in Africa was up 238 percent, from 58.6 million in 1980 to 198 million in 2012.

But that growth is primarily due to a higher birth rate, "not to conversion or evangelization," observed Thomas Reese, a social scientist and columnist for the

National Catholic Reporter who has seen the report.

If birth rate levels off with economic development, Reese wondered, then what? “Some like to say the Global South is the future of the church but I’m not convinced,” Reese said.

2. More people than ever before are receiving the core sacraments of Catholicism including baptism, First Communion, confirmation, and marriage in the church.

But the growth in absolute numbers disguises more telling numbers.

Worldwide, there has been just a 7 percent growth in parishes, the brick-and-mortar churches where these rites are held. And the overall rate per 1,000 Catholics receiving the sacraments “is in uninterrupted decline worldwide. It’s not keeping up with population growth,” said Mark Gray, senior research associate for CARA and a co-author of the report.

The reasons vary from a lack of interest in the West to a lack of access to parishes and priests in developing countries to simple demographics.

If birth rates fall, there are fewer babies to baptize. As life expectancy increases and the average age of Catholics rises, those areas with older Catholics have lower baptism rates: “You only get baptized once in your life,” Gray said.

In raw numbers, marriages are increasing. But measured by the rate per 1,000 Catholics, marriage in the church, said Gray “is one of the hardest-hit sacraments around the globe.”

3. There’s been a groundswell of new priests in Africa.

The church in Africa more than doubled in the number of priests between 1980 and 2012, from 17,346 to 40,133.

But “I was surprised to see they are not enough to balance the steep losses worldwide,” Reese said.

There’s been a 17 percent drop in the number of priests worldwide. It’s driven by a 32 percent plunge in Europe, for the same period, in which the number of priests fell from 243,319 to 165,229.

A separate bank of statistics researched by CARA tracking the U.S. church shows a 35 percent drop in priests between 1980 and 2014. That likely explains why the new global report shows barely a blip of growth for the Americas region as a whole.

Reese, 70, a Jesuit priest, political scientist and author, was ordained in 1962, the era before Vatican II reforms, when U.S. seminaries were packed. That world is not coming back, he said.

The report acknowledges, "The parishes that served the Church for hundreds and hundreds of years are no longer closely aligned with the world's Catholic population and certainly not its most frequently Mass attending populations. However, there is no giant crane that can pick up a parish from Europe and relocate it to Africa."

Reese is skeptical that such magic would even make a difference.

"Clearly the Catholic Church is becoming a southern church," he said. "But I am not convinced it's the future. I think it is simply a repeat of the past. . . . The decline of Christianity and religion in the West is simply going to come a generation later in Africa and Asia. Going to church on Sunday will no longer be the biggest thing in the village that week once people have all the First World distractions of the Northern Hemisphere."

The global statistics map out the issues but don't solve them.

"If we don't figure out how to save Catholicism in the USA and Europe, the same thing is going to happen in Africa in two or three generations," Reese said.