

**“The Workers are Few”:
*Priestly Vocations in America Since 1789***

—by John Quinn

Department of History Salve Regina University, Newport, Rhode Island

In a recent issue of the *National Catholic Reporter*, its editors warned their readers that a terrible crisis is looming for the Church in America. They quoted approvingly a recent talk given by Father Norman Rotert, the vicar-general of the Kansas City archdiocese, who said:

There is a huge issue that is not being confronted by the leadership of the church...the declining number of priests...[T]he potential for damage to the church is enormous. It is the top of an iceberg of other explosive issues...like sexuality, women’s rights, power...The shortage of priests is not going to be solved by gritting our teeth and praying for more vocations...We must celebrate the Eucharist or we will die.¹

Rotert went on to plea for the ordination of women and married men. The editors commended Rotert for his courage, but then remarked that “the tragedy is that the Vatican, instead of providing the space and means for conversation, keeps insisting that everyone simply shut up and stop thinking.”²

Dire pronouncements of this sort appear with great frequency in the pages of the *Reporter* and periodically in *America* and *Commonweal* as well.³ Indeed, one columnist for the *Reporter*, Tim Unsworth, was so troubled by this question that he put together a book about it and gave it a suitably apocalyptic title, *The Last Priests in America*.⁴ Unsworth chose as his subjects forty priests, mostly from the Chicago area and almost to a man liberal or radical on matters theological. A persistent theme that emerged from the men he interviewed was their fondness for Andrew Greeley; most referred at least once in their conversations to Greeley’s writings.

To buttress his argument that the celibate male priesthood is verging on extinction, Unsworth repeatedly referred to scholarly work done on the subject by Richard Schoenherr and Dean Hoge. Schoenherr, a sociologist at the University of Wisconsin and laicized priest, has projected that the number of diocesan clergy will have dropped 40% from 1966 to 2005. Schoenherr has no qualms about predicting the future: he asserts unhesitatingly that the priest shortage is irreversible.⁵ Hoge, a sociologist at the Catholic University of America and Presbyterian layman, accepts Schoenherr’s figures and argues that the shortage is an institutional one, not a spiritual one.⁶ He believes that the laity—including young people—are faith-filled and ready to serve, but are deterred by the Church’s strictures on celibacy.⁷

Schoennerr's and Hoge's research is significant and must be taken seriously. Certainly, the recent decline in the number of priests and seminarians should be a cause for concern among all thoughtful Catholics in America. However, their work and popular essays on the subject in the *National Catholic Reporter*, *Commonweal*, and *America* are problematical in several respects. First, they pay little attention to history, and act as if the Church in America had consistently had an abundance of priests until the 1970s. Studying the Church's past would certainly have made them aware of how dramatically vocation rates have varied over the decades and might well have caused them to be more cautious in their predictions for the future. Furthermore, while the Church in America has been losing priests overall, certain dioceses have been prospering while others have experienced sharp declines. None of these writers has investigated the thriving dioceses to see what is going right. Turning to history and examining current successes might give Schoenherr, Hoge, and Unsworth pause and encourage them to reconsider their apocalyptic assertions.

Vocations in the Nineteenth Century Church in America

As America's first Catholic bishop, John Carroll had a multitude of concerns, but chief among them seems to have been the desire to establish seminaries to train native born men for the priesthood. Writing to his English friend Father Charles Plowden in 1783, Carroll declared: "The object nearest my heart is to establish a college on this continent for the education of youth, which might at the same time be a seminary for future clergymen."⁸ At the time he had 24 priests to minister to 25,000 Catholics, roughly a 1:1000 priest to people ratio.⁹ Most of his priests were foreign born, however, and several were troublemakers. In addition his priests were not evenly distributed throughout the country. For example, in Pennsylvania he had only two priests to tend to the 7,000 Catholics there.¹⁰

To remedy these problems, Carroll established Georgetown Academy in 1789, hoping it would serve in part as a minor seminary. Two years later he founded St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore and staffed it with four French Sulpician priests. The schools struggled at first and their respective faculties mistrusted each other. During the 1790s only one student from Georgetown entered St. Mary's. Over the following decade, St. Mary's fortunes improved: nearly fifty men had enrolled there by 1810 and twenty three were ultimately ordained.¹¹

In 1808 Rome decided that Baltimore should become an archdiocese and that Boston, New York City, Philadelphia and Bardstown, Kentucky should be established as dioceses. Carroll was entrusted with finding suitable men to recommend for these new sees. For Boston he favored Father Francis Matignon, a French emigre who had served there since 1792. When informed of Carroll's plans, Matignon promptly wrote to him asking him to reconsider:

I am very far, my lord, from wishing to direct or even to influence your choice. But I cannot help saying that if you have decided to choose one of your suffragans from Boston,...there is not a single Catholic or Protestant here...who would not name my confrere .¹²

Carroll accepted this advice and nominated Boston's other priest, John Lefebvre de Cheverus, as its first bishop. Carroll faced similar difficulties in his search for candidates for the other sees.

Over the next twenty years the Church in America grew at a rapid pace as immigrants streamed in from Ireland and Germany. Dozens of new churches were built, new seminaries were opened in Maryland and Kentucky, and several new dioceses were established in the 1820s. All these efforts notwithstanding, the Church was not keeping pace with its burgeoning population. By 1829 there were 232 priests serving 500,000 Catholics;¹³ the priest to people ratio had slipped to about 1:2150.¹⁴ And some dioceses were even worse off. For example, when John Hughes took over as Bishop of New York in 1838, he had only forty priests available for the 200,000 Catholics in the diocese.¹⁵ The bishops were very much aware of the problem. At their 1833 provincial council meeting, they issued a pastoral letter which included a section on priestly vocations:

We cannot be always...dependent upon other nations for our ministry. We desire to see your children prepared to occupy our places. We call upon you to aid us in this effort. Some foreign churches...have liberally assisted us to supply their brethren with the opportunities of religion: they deserve our gratitude and our prayers...Where they have been so zealous, you should emulate their holy ardor.¹⁶

In their 1840 pastoral, the bishops returned again to the subject:

We have heretofore called your attention to the necessity...of providing for the succession of the ministry...to break the bread of life to you and your descendants. You cannot but be aware of its abiding importance. We rejoice to find that since our last council much has been done to secure this object: America must gradually become independent of foreign churches for the perpetuation of her priesthood...We exhort you then...to cooperate with us for this most necessary object.¹⁷

By 1852 more progress had been achieved. While the Catholic population had quadrupled over twenty years to two million, the Church had increased its clergy more than six fold to 1,471.¹⁸ The priest to people ratio had improved to 1: 145 still the bishops were not totally satisfied. When they convened again in

1866, they warned the laity that the clergy shortage had still not abated:

We continue to feel the want of zealous priests, in sufficient number to supply the daily increasing necessities of our dioceses. While we are gratified to know, that in some parts of our country the number of youths who offer themselves for the ecclesiastical state is rapidly increasing, we are obliged to remark, that in the other parts,...the number of such...has hitherto been lamentably small.¹⁹

The bishops then upbraided Catholic parents for “exaggerating the difficulties and dangers of the priestly calling, and painting in too glowing colors the advantages of a secular life.”²⁰ They concluded with a reminder to parents of Christ’s own words: “[E]very one that hath left house, or brother or father or mother, or wife or children, or lands for My name’s sake, shall receive a hundredfold.”²¹

By 1884 the Catholic population had quadrupled from what it had been in 1852; heavy immigration from Ireland and Germany after the Civil War had helped to swell the Church’s numbers. Still the Church was keeping pace with this massive influx. Scores of churches, parochial schools, hospitals, and orphanages were erected throughout the east and midwest. And the number of clergy was increasing rapidly as well. By this time the Church had just over 7,000 priests serving its flock of eight million; the priest to people ratio had improved to 1: 1135.²²

Indeed, when Church leaders convened in Baltimore for their Third Plenary Council in the fall, 1884, they exuded a confident air. There were now seventy-seven American bishops and all but one gathered in Baltimore for the meeting. On the opening day of the council, a seemingly endless line of elegantly robed churchmen processed from the Archbishop’s house to the cathedral: “fourteen archbishops, sixty-two bishops, six abbots, thirty-four superiors of religious congregations, eleven rectors of theological seminaries, eighty-one theologians, and twelve minor conciliar functionaries, a grand total of 220 clerics.”²³

From World War I to Vatican II

When the First World War came to end, the American bishops released the “Program on Social Reconstruction,” a long and wide-ranging letter analyzing America’s social and economic ills. While focusing on workers and their rights to join unions and receive just wages, the bishops again made reference to the Church’s need for vocations. This time, though, they were much more satisfied with their situation than their predecessors had been in 1866. Instead of chastising parents for inhibiting vocations, the bishops applauded them:

In our concern and desire for the increase of vocations, we are greatly encouraged as we reflect upon the blessings which the Church has

enjoyed in this respect. The generosity of so many parents, the sacrifices which they willingly make that their children may follow the calling of God, and the support so freely given to institutions for the training of priests and religious, are edifying and consoling.²⁴

The bishops had a good reason to be sanguine. For at this time they had 21,000 priests serving a population of almost 18 million.²⁵ In just thirty-five years, the Church had tripled its number of priests. And for the first time, the Church's priest to people ratio had dropped well below 1000 to 850. In the years after the war, a new challenge faced the Church in the form of a nativist backlash. Many Americans were angry that they had been dragged into Europe's war, and many were troubled by the waves of European immigrants that were landing on America's shores year after year. From 1880 to 1924 more than 20 million people had entered America.²⁶ Most came from southern or eastern Europe and the majority were Catholic.²⁷ In 1924 Congress enacted the Immigration Act which severely limited the entry of Italians, Poles, Hungarians, and Russians into America.

While sparked in part by anti-Catholicism, this legislation proved to be a blessing in some respects for the Church. With immigration all but cut off, the Catholic population began to grow at a more manageable pace. This lull in population growth gave the Church a chance to consolidate its position. Rather than having to focus their energy and resources on the latest group of immigrants, the bishops were able to build up the Church's infrastructure. In these years, a number of Catholic colleges were founded and a few long-established institutions like Notre Dame began to offer graduate programs.

Under these more stable conditions, the Church was able to make further headway with vocations. During the 1920s the Catholic population grew by 14% while the number of priests increased by 28%, and in the 1930s the Catholic population grew by only 6% while the number of clergy rose 26%.²⁸ By 1940 there were almost 36,000 priests ministering to 22 million Catholics; the priest to people ratio now stood at 1: 630.²⁹ Monsignor George Kelly recounts his experience entering New York's major seminary in 1936:

Fifty new aspirants, mostly ball players of one kind or another, each crowded into a small room in the seminary wing, sometimes in pairs because of the shortage of space. We did not have the least idea what we were getting into...Up at 5:30 a.m., prayers at 6, Mass at 6:30, class at 9, Chapel at 12, handball at 3, bed by 10, and no talking above the ground floor.³⁰

After the Second World War, the Church continued to expand. Father Hugh Nolan, a church historian, remarks that the post-war period has been called the "golden age" of American Catholicism.

The Catholics of that era were...proud of their Church, of their priests, of their schools. Attendance at the Latin Sunday Mass was excellent. Every Saturday there were long lines of parishioners awaiting confession. Novenas of all types were never better attended.³¹

Other observers take a more critical view. Will Herberg and James Hitchcock, for example, see Catholics as becoming thoroughly enamored of the American Way of Life and having only a tenuous link to the faith.³²

While the true health of the postwar Church may be uncertain, there can be no dispute that the Catholic population was increasing at a rapid rate. America was in the midst of the baby boom and Catholics played a disproportionate role in the phenomenon. In the 1950s, the Catholic population increased a staggering 47%. While the clergy increased by a healthy 25% in the decade, that was not enough to keep pace. On the eve of the Second Vatican Council in 1962, the priest to people ratio had slipped to 1: 771.³³

The Turbulent Sixties

For many American Catholics the 1960s proved a disorienting time as they faced dramatic change in both church and society. While the Council Fathers modified the liturgy and the rules for fasting and abstinence, their broader charge to the laity was to take a more open attitude towards the world around them. While the changes in discipline and emphasis would have proved troubling to some Catholics under any circumstance, for American Catholics the adjustment was doubly difficult because of the crises that American society was undergoing. By the late sixties much of movement had radicalized, opposition to the Vietnam War was crippling America's leading colleges and countless teenagers had begun experimenting with hallucinogenic drugs and casual sex.³⁴

With American society unravelling around them, many Catholics lost their bearings as well. Catholic academics began to wonder if the parochial system was really necessary anymore.³⁵ At the college level, the presidents of the leading Catholic colleges decided to turn over control to lay boards to insulate the schools from the bishops. A few schools including Manhattanville, in their search for relevance, took a bolder step: they secularized the institutions outright.

During these turbulent years, the clergy of course were not immune from the confusion and doubts which were afflicting so many other Catholics. While the number of clergy topped 59,000 in 1967, there were already disturbing signs that the priesthood was in crisis. Immediately after the Council, sizable numbers of priests began resigning their calling. In 1966, 200 diocesan priests quit; in 1968 almost 600 quit; and in 1969, 750 left. Indeed, in 1969 the number of priests who left almost equalled the number of those newly ordained. Richard Schoeherr

terms the years 1968-1974 as the time of the “mass exodus” from the priesthood. During this six year period, 4,100 diocesan priests left the active ministry.³⁶ Along with the priests were two bishops who resigned their positions to marry. Schoenherr claims that most the clergy who left were liberals unhappy with *Humanae Vitae* and with the celibacy rule.³⁷

While the number of priests seeking laicization was climbing, fewer men were being ordained each year and fewer were entering seminaries. Although more than 1,000 were ordained in 1967, by 1982 the number had dropped to only 511.³⁸ The decline in seminaries was more precipitous: 45,000 in 1967 but less than 12,000 in 1982.³⁹ While it must be noted that many of the 45,000 were minor seminarians, the majority of whom generally dropped out somewhere along the line, this decline was still dramatic and worrisome for the Church.

To understand the severity of the crisis facing the clergy in the late 1960s and 1970s, one can look to the Jesuits disastrous handling of their flagship, theologate, Woodstock College. Established in Maryland in 1869, Woodstock gained fame in the 1950s because of Father John Courtney Murray’s presence there. Garry Wills, a one-time Jesuit seminarian, vividly recalls the campus:

Woodstock College, folded into the hills of Maryland, is a historic place—the first, and for long the best, Jesuit school of theology in this country. Its main building, hewn of native white stone...is very impressive, each wing of it backed by semidetached bell towers.⁴⁰

In the late sixties influential American Jesuits began to press for the College to relocate to an urban environment. In a city, it was reasoned, the Jesuits would be able to build a vibrant community, “dialoguing” with non-Catholics and ministering to the poor and the homeless. After some debate, the decision was made in 1969: Woodstock College would relocate to the upper West Side of New York City so as to be in close proximity to Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University.⁴¹

The students and faculty settled in a cluster of apartments living in groups varying in size from two to twenty-five. Wills describes the community’s “common room”:

The suite in which [the Jesuits] meet...has a bar, with draft Budweiser served in cold tankards all night, called “The Gang Plank” [because of its] nautical motif....Trendy rock is taped into the Gang Plank with politely high fidelity.⁴²

Wills notes that the community’s hip atmosphere impressed Columbia’s president, William McGill. Woodstock’s academic president, Father Christopher Mooney,

told Wills that “the place really blew [McGill’s] mind. He talked to young theologians in everything from beards and sandals to business suits and ties, working in places like the UN and police stations.”⁴³

To a number of Jesuits, however, the fruits of this experiment were not so apparent. In 1973 the order’s leadership decided to close the venerable college down completely. During the school’s four years in New York, more than forty Jesuits—seminarians and priests alike—had left the society. Among those departing were the provincial, the rector of the college, and several senior faculty members.⁴⁴

Vocations in the Eighties and Nineties

By the early eighties the Church in America was beginning to stabilize again. With the papacy in the hands of John Paul II, Catholics throughout the world were urged to remain faithful to Church teachings “in season and out of season,” and dissident theologians were reined in.

Nevertheless the decline that had begun shortly after the Council continued on into the 1980s. Mass attendance rates continued to drop, as did the number of men and women studying for the priesthood and religious life. Throughout the decade ordinations to the diocesan priesthood averaged around 500 per year, which was not equal to the number of priests dying, retiring or resigning each year.⁴⁵ While the number of priests stood at 59,000 in 1980—almost unchanged from the total in 1967—at the end of the decade there were 52,000, a 12% drop.⁴⁶

Signs of Hope

While the situation remains serious, there have nonetheless been a number of encouraging signs since 1990. For one, ordinations have gone up to about 600 per year, a 20% increase over the 1980s. At the same time, the resignation rate has dropped to about 125 priests per year, which is much lower than it was in the immediate post-conciliar years.⁴⁷ Thus, while ordinations are still not keeping pace with deaths and retirements, the gap is narrowing. The Church in America presently has about 50,000 priests serving 55 million Catholics, or 1 priest for every 1,100 Catholics. While the priest to people ratio is higher now than it was in the postwar era, it is consistent with nineteenth and early twentieth century ratios.

But what’s perhaps most striking about vocations in the 1990s is the disparities in the number of seminarians in various dioceses. Several dioceses have had considerable success in recruiting men for the priesthood in recent years. Peoria, Illinois and Arlington, Virginia are two notable cases. In Peoria, where 55 men are presently studying for the priesthood, the Bishop, John Myers, has asked the laity to prepare for the “re-priesting” of the diocese. One priest parishes will soon be staffed by two and two priests parishes will have three.

In Arlington, Bishop John Keating has dramatically increased his corps of diocesan priests in the past decade. Whereas in 1985, he had 90 diocesan priests,

now he has 126, a 40% increase. And according to his vocation director, Father James Gould, the bishop plans to ordain 22 more men in the coming year. For Gould, “the real problem will be finding 22 beds for them.”⁴⁸

What Peoria and Arlington have in common are bishops who are outspokenly orthodox and are willing to recruit aggressively for seminarians. The successes in Peoria, Arlington, Lincoln, Nebraska and other orthodox dioceses have led Archbishop Elden Curtiss of Omaha to ask whether the “vocation crisis” is real or contrived. In an editorial in his archdiocesan paper, Curtiss bluntly noted the link between orthodoxy and plentiful vocations.

I personally think the vocation “crisis” in this country is more artificial...than many people realize....When there is strong support for vocations, and a minimum of dissent about the male celibate priesthood and religious life loyal to the magisterium; when bishops, priests, Religious and lay people are united in vocation ministry—then there are documented increases in the numbers of candidates who answer the call.⁴⁹

The Archbishop then claimed that whatever vocation “crisis” the Church is facing has been caused “by people who want to change the Church’s agenda, by people who do not support orthodox candidates loyal to the magisterial teaching.”⁵⁰

Indeed, the evidence seems to support Curtiss’s claim. For it is not only the case that orthodox dioceses are thriving, but progressive dioceses have a dearth of seminarians. Milwaukee, for example, which is headed by Archbishop Rembert Weakland, has only twenty-two seminarians at present. Although the Milwaukee archdiocese has two-and-a-half times as many people as the Peoria diocese, it has less than half as many seminarians as Peoria. Weakland is very concerned about the future clergy demographics for Milwaukee. Indeed, he is so worried that in 1991 he issued a pastoral letter saying that he would consider ordaining married men to the priesthood—subject to Rome’s approval.⁵¹ Vatican officials were not pleased by this statement and informed the archbishop that his plan was “out of place.”⁵²

Indeed, the more one studies priestly vocations in the post-conciliar Church, the clearer it becomes that ideology places a large part in the so-called crisis. While the Church is facing—and will continue to face—real challenges in preaching the Gospel and seeking workers for the harvest, these obstacles are not insurmountable. Contrary to Tim Unsworth’s claim, the priesthood is not facing extinction. Nor is it in a state of “irreversible decline” as Richard Schoenherr has announced. The workers in America are indeed few at present—just as they have oftentimes been in the past—but this should not be a cause for despair. Instead, American Catholics must keep the faith and implore the Lord of the harvest to send more workers.⁵³

Notes

- 1 "Journalists Hear Frank Talk about Church Issues," *National Catholic Reporter*, October 13, 1995, 2.
- 2 "This Fractious Family Wants to Sit Down and Talk," *National Catholic Reporter*, October 13, 1995, 20.
- 3 See for example, "Where Are We Going"? *Commonweal* 122 (April 7, 1995): 3-4; Rev. E. T. Gomulka, "The Priest Shortage: Remaining 'Semper Fi' With Fewer Priests," *America* 170 (April 16, 1994): 8-9.
- 4 (New York, 1991).
- 5 See Richard Schoenherr, "Numbers Don't Lie: A Priesthood in Irreversible Decline," *Commonweal* 122 (April 7, 1995): 11-14.
- 6 Dean R. Hoge, *The Future of Catholic Leadership: Responses to the Priest Shortage* (Kansas City, 1987), 215.
7. *Ibid.*, xiii.
- 8 Rev. John Carroll to Rev. Charles Plowden, September 23, 1783, printed in Annabelle M. Melville, *John Carroll of Baltimore* (New York, 1955), 136.
9. 1:1041.
10. See Dennis Castillo, "The Origin of the Priest Shortage: 1942-1962," *America* 167 (October 24, 1992), 303.
- 11 Melville, *John Carroll*, 151.
- 12 Rev. Francis Matignon to Carroll, April 6, 1807, printed in Walter Whitehill, *A Memorial to Bishop Cheverus* (Boston, 1951), xi.
13. See *Pastoral Letters of the U.S. Catholic Bishops 1792- 1983*, ed. Hugh Nolan, 4 vols. (Washington, DC, 1983), 1: 467.
14. 1: 2157.
15. See Dale Steiner, *Of Thee We Sing: Immigrants and American History* (San Diego, 1987), 105.
16. *Pastoral Letters*, 1: 78.
17. *Ibid.*, 1: 127-12
18. *Ibid.*, 1:467
19. *Ibid.*, 1: 200.
20. *Ibid.*, 1: 201
21. Mt. 19: 28.
22. *Pastoral Letters*, 1: 467.
23. Quoted in Marvin R. O'Connell, *John Ireland and the American Catholic Church* (St. Paul, 1988), 173.
24. *Pastoral Letters*, 1: 292.
25. *Ibid.*, 1: 468.
26. See Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life* (New York, 1990), 124.

27. About two millions Jews were fleeing persecution in Russia.
28. See Castillo, 303
29. See *Pastoral Letters*, 1: 468.
30. Monsignor George A. Kelly, *Inside My Father's House* (New York, 1989), 10-11.
31. *Pastoral Letters*, 1: 7.
32. See Will Herberg, *Protestant Catholic Jew* (New York, 1955), 136-171; James Hitchcock, "What Went Wrong in the Fifties," *Crisis* 10 (November 1992): 15-19.
33. Castillo, 303.
34. See Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York, 1987); Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York, 1984).
35. See, for example, Mary Perkins Ryan, *Are Parochial Schools the Answer? Catholic Education in Light of the Council* (New York, 1964).
36. Richard Schoenherr, "Quitting the Clergy: Resignations in the Roman Catholic Priesthood," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 29 (1990) : 468.
37. Lawrence Young and Richard Schoenherr, "The Changing Age Distribution and Theological Attitudes of Catholic Priests Revisited," *Sociological Analysis* 53 (1990), 525.
38. Schoenherr, "Quitting the Clergy," 468.
39. See *Catholic Almanac* (1986), 525.
40. Garry Wills, *Bare Ruined Choirs* (New York, 1971), 141.
41. Joseph Becker, SJ, *The Re-Formed Jesuits: A History of Changes in Jesuit Formation during the Decade, 1965-1975* (San Francisco, 1992), 128-129.
42. Wills, 198-199.
43. *Ibid.*, 199.
44. See James Hitchcock, *The Pope and the Jesuits* (New York, 1984), 29; Becker, *The Reformed Jesuits*, 136, 192-193.
45. See Schoenherr, "Numbers Don't Lie," 12.
46. *Catholic Almanac*, 431.
47. Schoenherr, "Numbers Don't Lie," 11-12.
48. Michael Flach, "What Went Right"? *Catholic World Report* (May, 1995), 36.
49. Most Reverend Elden Curtiss, "Crisis in Vocations? What Crisis"? *Our Sunday Visitor* (October 8, 1995), 18.
50. *Ibid.*
51. "Archbishop of Milwaukee Would Ordain Married Men," *New York Times*, January 9, 1991, A9.
52. See *Catholic Almanac* (1993), 68.
53. Lk. 10:2.