

Editorial: Data sets the table for much-needed discussion

NCR Editorial Staff | Jun. 22, 2015

Editorial

The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, an independent research organization [celebrating its 50th anniversary](#) [1], has become a valuable, if underused, asset of the church in the United States.

Though the social sciences have been frowned upon from time to time as unnecessary to the church's mission, CARA has repeatedly demonstrated that understanding the changing dynamics of the church, while often disruptive of the status quo, is preferable to proceeding as if the church is immutable down to its last details.

Never has the church been as much in need of such information as it is today. It is experiencing huge shifts in its population from the old Catholic strongholds of the Northeast and Midwest to the South and West; the arrival of large numbers of immigrants from all over the developing world; and continuing declines in the numbers of priests and nuns, the personnel who once sustained the old parish model.

Most of the forces changing what was once the iconic Catholic presence in the culture are beyond anyone's control. What is within the control of church leadership, should it want to take up the task, is the shape of the emerging church. To this point -- and the changes have been underway for decades -- the bishops, as a national body, have been largely content to sit back and watch what happens.

And a lot is happening. Change is occurring, by dint of necessity, at all levels of the church. It remains, however, a hodgepodge of solutions or stopgap measures that are dependent on the disposition of individual bishops and the severity of the need in a given situation, and so is subject to great fluctuations from year to year and diocese to diocese.

The questions are huge and more compelling by the year. Will dioceses keep reducing the number of parishes and increasing their size to gargantuan proportions to accommodate the diminishing number of priests?

Currently, about 40,000 trained and degreed lay ministers are paid workers for the church. Will the leadership continue to value them and make a commitment to their ministry and to paying them a living wage?

What about parishes without pastors? Will bishops open up leadership positions to women or married couples?

What is to be made of the wild growth in the ordination of permanent deacons? What is the nature of their ministry of service? Is there a definition that covers them nationally or is this another matter of bishops determining for themselves what deacons will be permitted to do?

More than half (55 percent according to CARA) of deacons receive no pay for their ministerial service. Is that a sustainable model?

Is there any substance to the suspicion that arises among lay ministers that the glut of permanent deacons is a thinly disguised attempt to create another thick layer of male-only ordained ministry to replace dwindling

priests?

The isolated debates about the number of vocations tend to generate a lot of heat while the larger, far more important picture gets ignored.

The drop in priests and nuns, it turns out, is itself a corrective to an aberration that too often is viewed as normative. The era of rectories full of priests and convents full of nuns was rather short, lasting roughly from the mid-'40s to the mid-'60s. That period is long over. The parochial model of churches and schools so dependent on those big numbers is also a thing of the past.

Desperately needed is the kind of leadership that will encourage people to imagine the shape of the future church. It will certainly be quite different in appearance and ecclesiology from the old model that served so well in the last century. But 21st-century realities -- from the influence of the digital age to the changing face of ministry -- will require new approaches to forming and sustaining the Catholic community.

CARA has a rich trove of data that nicely sets the table for the discussion that has to occur at some point. Imagining the future does not have to proceed from nothing.



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