



*The*  
State of  
**Priestly Vocations**  
in the United States  

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**2025 Update**



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# Major Findings from 2023 State of Priestly Vocations Report:

Vocation Ministry's 2023 *State of Priestly Vocations* report, based on the 2021 data from the *Official Catholic Directory*, served as both a wake-up call and a resource, equipping dioceses with data-driven insights to better understand the challenges and opportunities in fostering priestly vocations.

**1. Decline in Priestly Vocations:** A steady decrease in the number of priestly ordinations was observed in many dioceses across the country, continuing a long-term trend of fewer men entering seminary and completing formation.

**2. Parishioner-to-Priest Ratios:** Dioceses with lower ratios of parishioners per active priest tended to have higher ordination rates. This suggests that priests with manageable pastoral responsibilities may have more capacity to foster personal relationships and encourage vocations.

**3. Importance of Vocation Directors:** Dioceses with dedicated and active vocation directors reported higher success rates in recruiting and supporting seminarians. This under-

scores the vital role of leadership in vocation promotion.

**4. Impact of Seminarian Discern-Out Rates:** The report estimated and used a 30% discern-out rate of diocesan seminarians to calculate how many seminarians are needed for each diocese.

**5. Success Factors in Growing Dioceses:** Common characteristics of dioceses with growing vocations included robust parish-level promotion, active collaboration between priests and lay leaders, and targeted youth and young adult ministry programs.

## Tier System:

Vocation Ministry introduced a **Tier System** in the 2023 *State of Priestly*

Vocations report to categorize dioceses into one of four tiers based on overall Catholic population size. This system allowed for a nuanced analysis of key metrics related to vocations, such as ordination rates and seminarian enrollment, recognizing that dioceses face different challenges and opportunities depending on their size and resources. The tiers were as follows:

## Tier 1

- ◆ **Characteristics:** These dioceses, typically highly urban or mostly urban, serve large Catholic populations, exceeding 750,000 Catholics.
- ◆ **Challenges:** High number of parishioners for each active priest, administrative complexity, and the need to address a broad range of cultural and demographic factors.
- ◆ **Opportunities:** Access to greater financial and pastoral resources, larger pools of potential candidates, and well-established vocation offices.

## Tier 2

- ◆ **Characteristics:** These dioceses typically encompass mid-sized metropolitan areas as well as some rural areas and serve Catholic populations ranging from 300,000 to 750,000 Catholics.
- ◆ **Challenges:** Balancing resource limitations with the need to reach a diverse range of communities.
- ◆ **Opportunities:** Medium-sized dioceses

often benefit from a manageable scale that allows for more personalized vocation promotion while still leveraging significant resources.

## Tier 3

- ◆ **Characteristics:** These dioceses serve from 100,000 to 300,000 Catholics, often in mostly rural or less densely populated regions.
- ◆ **Challenges:** Limited resources, fewer priests, and reduced visibility of the Church in the broader community.
- ◆ **Opportunities:** Smaller communities often foster closer priest-parishioner relationships, enabling priests to personally encourage discernment and vocations.

## Tier 4

- ◆ **Characteristics:** These dioceses serve fewer than 100,000 Catholics, often spread across large geographic areas with rural or sparsely populated communities.
- ◆ **Challenges:** Limited resources and fewer candidates make it difficult to sustain strong vocation programs. The cities have larger parishes with multiple priests, and many times the rural areas have become (or remain) mission territory where priests oversee multiple, smaller parishes.
- ◆ **Opportunities:** The smaller scale can allow for closer priest-parishioner relationships, creating fertile ground

for personal mentorship and vocation encouragement.

## Purpose of the Tier System

The tier system was designed to:

### 1. Provide Contextual Comparisons:

Comparing dioceses within the same tier helped identify what works for similarly resourced and sized dioceses.

**2. Highlight Best Practices:** The system spotlighted dioceses excelling

within their tiers, allowing others to learn from their strategies.

### 3. Facilitate Customized Solutions:

Recognizing that a “one-size-fits-all” approach would not be effective, the tier system encouraged dioceses to tailor their vocation efforts to their unique circumstances.

By analyzing data through the lens of these tiers, the report offered actionable insights and practical recommendations that were relevant to dioceses of all sizes.



# State of Priestly Vocations Report – 2025 Update

## New Insights

This report provides an updated analysis based on the 2023 vocation numbers reported in the 2024 *Official Catholic Directory*.

While this document serves as a summary of key insights, it is not intended as an exhaustive examination of the data (for a complete review of our findings, please visit [VocationMinistry.com](http://VocationMinistry.com)). Our aim is to offer a vocational snapshot of the Church in America, identifying emerging trends that significantly impact vocation promotion.

The report highlights areas where the Church is experiencing growth in vocations, as well as regions where efforts may need to be revisited and reevaluated. Through this updated analysis, Vocation Ministry has developed a deeper understanding of the data and its correlations, enabling more targeted strategies for fostering vocations. In addition to the analysis of the 2023 vocation data, this report offers new in-

formation on 10-year Averages, Total Active Priests, a Priestly Availability Index, Catholic Marriages, a revised Seminarian Discern-Out Rate, and an

### Seminarians

#### Top 4 Dioceses in Each Tier

Diocese	Tier	%*
Dallas, Texas	1	69%
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	1	57%
Newark, New Jersey	1	55%
Atlanta, Georgia	1	52%
Cincinnati, Ohio	2	97%
Columbus, Ohio	2	88%
Denver, Colorado	2	86%
Washington, DC	2	85%
Wichita, Kansas	3	195%
Nashville, Tennessee	3	111%
Kansas City-St. Joseph, Missouri	3	106%
Grand Rapids, Michigan	3	104%
Lincoln, Nebraska	4	107%
Bismarck, North Dakota	4	96%
Tulsa, Oklahoma	4	75%
Fargo, North Dakota	4	74%

\* Percent of Total Seminarians vs. Need 2014-2023; 100% indicates a diocese had sufficient seminarians to sustain its current priestly population through ordinations

(Table 1)

Update on Correlations.

## 10-year Averages:

In conjunction with presenting the 2023 data and analysis, Vocation Ministry now has sufficient data to provide 10-year averages (2014-2023)

for key metrics such as:

- ◆ **Average Number of Seminarians per diocese**
- ◆ **Percentage of Total Seminarians vs. Base Need Seminarian Rate** for a diocese to ordain enough men to maintain its current level of priests. (See Table 1 and formula in Appendix A)
- ◆ **Average Number of Ordinations per diocese**
- ◆ **Priestly Ordination Average vs. Base Need Ordination Rate** for a diocese to maintain its current level of priests. (See Table 2 and formula in Appendix A)

### Ordinations Dioceses Demonstrating Growth 2014-2023

Diocese	Tier	%*
Paterson, New Jersey	2	128%
Arlington, Virginia	2	102%
Wichita, Kansas	3	255%
Nashville, Tennessee	3	170%
Springfield, Illinois	3	160%
Kansas City-St. Joseph, Missouri	3	150%
Little Rock, Arkansas	3	143%
Fort Wayne-South Bend, Indiana	3	123%
Sioux Falls, South Dakota	3	115%
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania	3	110%
Grand Rapids, Michigan	3	105%
Madison, Wisconsin	3	103%
Lincoln, Nebraska	4	140%
Covington, Kentucky	4	120%
Bismarck, North Dakota	4	110%
Duluth, Minnesota	4	110%

\*Average Percent Ordained vs. Need 2014-2023 - 100% indicates a diocese ordained enough priests to maintain its current level of priests; >100% indicates a diocese ordained enough priests to exceed its current level of priests, reflecting growth

(Table 2)

Not one diocese in Tier 1 ordained the number of new priests needed to maintain their current level of priests. 16 total dioceses across Tiers 2-4 ordained more than their need over the 10-year period.

These long-term averages offer a clearer picture of national trends, allowing us to assess not just year-over-year fluctuations, but also deeper patterns in vocation growth or decline.



## Total Active Priests in U.S. Dioceses

The data on Total Active Priests serving in parish ministry across the United States highlights both the dis-

tribution of priests and the reliance on different categories of clergy—Diocesan Priests, Extern Priests, and Religious Priests—within the various tiers of dioceses.

Active Priests by Tier

Tier	1	2	3	4
Number of Dioceses	21	40	61	53
Diocesan Priests	3,609	4,419	3,952	1,995
Extern Priests	1,238	949	1,033	474
Religious Priests in Parishes	528	481	508	285
Total Active Priests	5,375	5,849	5,493	2,754

(Table 3)

## Extern and Religious Priests

An **extern priest** is a priest who belongs to a diocese other than the one in which he is currently ministering. These priests often serve in a host diocese for various reasons, such as filling pastoral shortages, pursuing specialized ministry opportunities, or studying at a seminary or university located in the host diocese.

An extern priest remains a priest of his home diocese or religious order but commits himself to the bishop of the host diocese, who likewise takes responsibility and provides oversight for

him while he serves in the host diocese.

### Priests from religious orders (often referred to as “religious priests”)

make invaluable contributions to parish ministry throughout the United States, often stepping in to support diocesan clergy, particularly in rural or under-served areas. Their presence enriches the Church by bringing diverse spiritual perspectives and offering specialized expertise in various areas of ministry. In Tier 3 dioceses, for instance, religious priests serve 470 parishes, demonstrating their vital role in meeting the pastoral needs of mid-

sized dioceses and strengthening the overall mission of the Church.

Some positive effects of extern and religious priests on a diocese are:

**1. Supporting Local Clergy and Filling Shortages:**

Extern and religious priests help alleviate shortages by serving parishes that may otherwise lack a resident pastor, ensuring sacramental and pastoral care for parishioners. They can lighten the load for overburdened diocesan clergy, especially in regions where priests are responsible for multiple parishes. Religious priests are often stationed at parishes which have a long heritage of being staffed by their particular religious order, and therefore can provide extra stability.

**2. Cultural and Linguistic Diversity:**

Many extern (and some religious) priests bring unique cultural and linguistic skills, which can enhance ministry to diverse Catholic populations, such as immigrant communities.

**3. Broadened Perspectives:**

Extern and religious priests often introduce different pastoral approaches and experiences from their home dioceses or religious order's traditions, enriching the diocesan Church's diversity.

**4. Specialized Skills:**

Some extern and religious priests may bring expertise in areas like canon law, theology, or pastoral counseling, benefiting the broader diocesan mission.

Extern and Religious Priests by Tier

Tier	1	2	3	4
Catholics Served by Resident Religious Priests	3,192,968	1,631,657	1,034,529	326,252
Parishes Served by Resident Religious Priests	306	345	470	332
Catholics Served by Extern Priests	7,486,543	3,219,216	2,103,677	542,608
Parishes Served by Extern Priests	717	681	955	551

(Table 4)

Extern and religious priests play a vital role in addressing pastoral needs, but their ministry can pose unique challenges.

For example, while some extern priests remain in their host diocese for decades, others are more transient, serving for only a few years; this makes it difficult to maintain the continuity and accessibility needed for effective vocational promotion. Their temporary status can impact their ability to form lasting relationships with parishioners and contribute to long-term diocesan goals. For international externs, navigating complex immigration laws can further complicate their ministry, affecting their stability and capacity to serve. Many also face cultural and linguistic barriers that can hinder their integration into parish and diocesan life.

Religious priests remain under the authority of their superior, which may limit their long-term availability to the diocese. Changes in their assignments, often driven by the needs of their community rather than the host diocese, can disrupt parish stability. Second, the focus of religious orders may not always align perfectly with diocesan priorities, potentially creating gaps in pastoral or administrative responsibilities.

Differences in formation and pastoral approaches with extern and religious priests can also create difficulties in aligning with local expectations. Their canonical attachment to their home diocese or order adds complexity to oversight and accountability.

From a vocation promotion perspective, heavy reliance on extern and religious priests can mask the urgent need to cultivate diocesan vocations, diverting attention from addressing declining vocations locally. This may delay necessary efforts to address the shortage of diocesan priests and investments in seminarian formation and vocation promotion. While some religious priests promote vocations within the local diocese, many can be more concerned with promoting vocations to their particular order.

These factors highlight the need for a thoughtful, strategic approach to fully benefit from their ministry while fostering the growth of local vocations.

# Priestly Availability Index

In addition to the “Parishioners Each Active Priest Serves Correlation”, which was revealed in the 2023 report, Vocation Ministry has developed a Priestly Availability Index (PAI), designed to measure the accessibility of priests to potential candidates for the priesthood or religious life. This index uses a combination of metrics, including:

- ◆ The average number of parishioners each active priest serves in a diocese
- ◆ The average number of parishes under each active priest’s care in a diocese

These factors significantly impact a priest’s ability to cultivate meaningful, individual relationships with young men discerning a vocation. While a priest’s primary responsibility is to serve his flock, his ability to nurture potential vocations can be either strengthened or hindered depending on his availability.

In dioceses where priests serve multiple parishes or large congregations, there is less time and energy for personal outreach or spiritual mentorship. Conversely, in dioceses where priests have fewer administrative burdens and smaller communities, they are better positioned to develop and foster these critical relationships.

A high Priestly Availability Index value indicates that a diocese has more opportunity for discerners to develop a relationship with a priest and begin a vocational pathway. A low Priestly Availability Index score indicates a diocese where priests are stretched thin, and access is more difficult to obtain.

The Priestly Availability Index helps dioceses see how access to priests may influence vocation growth. It can guide them in finding ways to adjust resources or pastoral assignments to better support vocations. By increasing priest availability, dioceses can connect more easily with potential candidates, providing the personal guidance and spiritual support needed for discernment.

The Priestly Availability Index shown for each Tier tells only part of the story. To see the individual index for each diocese, visit

[www.vocationministry.com/  
state-of-priestly-vocations-report/](http://www.vocationministry.com/state-of-priestly-vocations-report/).



### Priestly Availability by Tier

Tier	1	2	3	4
Number of Dioceses	21	40	61	53
Avg # of Parishioners Each Active Priest Serves 2014-2023	6,971	3,615	2,168	1,200
Avg % Ordained vs Need 2014-2023	41%	63%	74%	63%
Total Active Priests per Parish	1.73	1.49	1.15	0.95
Priestly Availability Index	29	33	45	62

(Table 5)

## What Does Priestly Ministry Look Like in Each Tier?

### Tier 1 - Average Priestly Availability Index: 29

Priests serving in the largest parish communities of Tier 1 dioceses benefit from robust administrative and liturgical support, allowing them to focus on sacramental ministry, preaching, and vocational promotion. These vibrant parishes often offer dynamic faith experiences, access to Catholic schools, and opportunities to engage a wide range of parishioners. However, the size of these communities can make it challenging to build personal

relationships with parishioners. Managing multiple committees, ministries, and possibly a Catholic school can lead to administrative overload. Balancing these demands requires strong organizational skills and pastoral energy to ensure effective ministry and meaningful connections. A priest may have to find places to be intentional about promoting vocations: altar servers, homeschool families, youth ministry.

### Tier 2 - Average Priestly Availability Index: 33

Priests in Tier 2 dioceses serving large

parish communities benefit from a balanced environment that combines moderate administrative support with the ability to cultivate personal connections with parishioners. These parishes often have active ministries and schools, providing opportunities for vibrant faith formation and community engagement. However, priests in Tier 2 still face significant responsibilities, including managing growing congregations and multiple ministries, often with fewer resources than Tier 1 parishes. While these challenges can stretch their time and energy, they also provide opportunities for creative pastoral approaches and deeper involvement in fostering parish life and vocational awareness.

### **Tier 3 - Average Priestly Availability Index: 45**

Priests in Tier 3 dioceses benefit from the opportunity to form meaningful relationships within congregations that are often smaller and more close-knit than in higher tiers. These parishes typically have a strong sense of community, allowing priests to engage more deeply in pastoral care and vocational promotion. However, these priests face unique challenges, including fewer resources and limited administrative support, which can add strain to their already demanding roles. Balancing the pastoral needs of parishioners with administrative duties, often without the benefit of

a large staff or robust ministries, can stretch their capacity. Despite these obstacles, priests in Tier 3 parishes have the chance to foster a more personal and intentional ministry, often becoming central figures in their parishioners' spiritual lives.

### **Tier 4 - Average Priestly Availability Index: 62**

Priests serving smaller communities often have the unique opportunity to build close, personal relationships with parishioners, fostering a deeper sense of trust and connection. However, the challenges of such ministry can be significant. With limited or no staff support for administrative or liturgical tasks, these priests must rely heavily on volunteers, adding to their responsibilities. Additionally, many Tier 4 priests travel long distances to administer sacraments across multiple parishes, which can strain their time and energy, making it difficult to sustain those vital personal connections that are so integral to effective pastoral care.

## **Parish Dynamics**

### **1. Parish Size and Demographics**

*Small Parishes:* Smaller parishes allow priests to build deeper, more personal relationships with parishioners, including youth. This strong sense of community can foster personalized mentorship and spiritual

guidance, creating a supportive setting conducive to discernment. However, limited youth populations may hinder the development of robust programs such as youth groups or retreats, reducing opportunities to identify and nurture potential vocations.

*Large Parishes:* Larger parishes often have more youth and resources to sustain vibrant programs, offering fertile ground for vocational engagement. Yet, the size of the community can make it difficult for priests to connect personally with all individuals, potentially diluting their influence on vocational discernment.

## 2. Youth Presence and Engagement

A parish with an active youth population provides a natural base for fostering vocations through altar server programs, youth ministry, and catechesis. In contrast, parishes with minimal youth presence face challenges in sustaining engagement or cultivating interest in vocations.

## 3. Priest's Personal Approach

Priests possess significant autonomy in determining how they allocate their time, allowing them to focus on various aspects of parish life, including sacramental duties, pastoral care, and community engagement. This flexibility can be a powerful tool in fostering vocations. Priests who are naturally drawn to

**Priests who engage intentionally with young people help cultivate a culture where vocations are seen as natural and fulfilling paths, making a lasting impact on the parish community.**

family and youth ministry often find fulfillment in mentoring altar servers, leading youth groups, or organizing events for young adults. By investing time in these activities, they not only build meaningful relationships but also serve as role models and spiritual guides, creating a nurturing environment where vocations can flourish.

Conversely, some priests may prioritize other areas of ministry, such as adult faith formation or liturgical duties, either due to personal interests or comfort levels. While this approach is valid and contributes to the parish's overall mission, it can limit opportunities to build personal connections with youth that are critical for inspiring vocational discernment. **Priests who engage intentionally with young people help cultivate a culture where vocations are seen as natural and fulfilling paths, making a lasting impact on the parish community.** While fostering a culture of vocations through meaningful engagement with youth and families, priests must navigate the safe envi-

ronment protocols, recognizing the importance of these measures while adapting their ministry to build trust and supportive relationships within this framework.

Ultimately, the priest's personal commitment to youth ministry, combined with the time and energy he dedicates to building relationships, plays a crucial role in cultivating a thriving culture of vocation within the parish.

Find out more about ways that priests can foster a vocation-rich environment at [www.vocationministry.com/parish-resource/parish/priests/](http://www.vocationministry.com/parish-resource/parish/priests/).



#### **4. Cultural Context**

Communities that have a higher concentration of immigrant families often bring a deep emphasis on faith and family, which can inspire vocational interest and provide a strong foundation for discernment. However, men and women discerning their vocation from predominantly immigrant parishes face unique challenges rooted in cultural realities. Many

immigrant families prioritize stability and financial security, which can create pressure to pursue careers over religious life. Language barriers and cultural differences may also result in a disconnect between vocational opportunities and the parish community. Despite these challenges, the rich faith traditions and devotion within immigrant communities present significant opportunities for fostering vocations.

#### **5. Socioeconomic Context**

Parishes in economically challenged areas may struggle to support vibrant discernment programs due to limited resources. Priests in these settings are often stretched thin and juggling numerous responsibilities, which leaves less time for personalized mentorship. The lack of financial stability can also make it difficult to offer activities or programs that encourage and sustain vocational discernment. These socioeconomic hurdles complicate efforts to cultivate vocations but also highlight the need for innovative approaches to nurture future priestly and religious vocations in underserved communities.

#### **6. Staffing and Volunteer Support**

The availability of staff and dedicated volunteers impacts a priest's capacity to focus on vocational promotion. Small or understaffed parishes often rely on the priest for administrative duties, reducing time



for personal mentorship. Well-supported parishes, however, free priests to concentrate on pastoral and vocational engagement.

### 7. Parish Culture and History

Parishes with a tradition of fostering vocations may have established programs, prayer groups, or community expectations that encourage discernment. Conversely, parishes without such a history may require more effort from their priests and laity to build a vocational culture from the ground up.

### 8. Geographic Location

Rural or remote parishes may challenge priests who serve multiple communities, reducing their availability for focused vocational work. Urban parishes, while more centralized, may contend with a fast-paced culture that hinders deep, personal connections.

Understanding these dynamics allows priests and parish leaders to tailor their approaches, maximizing the potential for vocational growth in any parish setting.

## Seminarian Discern-Out Rate

Seminary formation is a deeply intentional and mutual process of discernment in which both the seminarian and the Church evaluate the individual's calling to the priesthood. This time is structured to help seminarians grow spiritually, intellectually, pastorally, and humanly, ensuring they develop the qualities needed for effective ministry. Through prayer, academic studies, pastoral assignments, and community life, seminarians are given opportunities to deepen

their relationship with Christ and their understanding of the priestly vocation.

At the same time, the Church carefully discerns the seminarian's readiness and suitability for ordained ministry.



This mutual discernment ensures that candidates are not only personally called by God but also affirmed by the Church as capable of living out the demands and responsibilities of priestly life. This collaborative process safeguards the integrity of the priesthood and provides seminarians with the support and guidance they need to truly discern God's will.

In our 2023 report, Vocation Ministry estimated an average Seminarian Discern-Out Rate of 30%, based on survey responses from vocation directors nationwide. This percentage helped project how many seminarians and ordinations a diocese might require to meet future needs.

Since the report's release in February 2023, Vocation Ministry has part-

nered with over twenty-five dioceses across the 4 Tiers to gather detailed, diocese-specific data. Through this process, we discovered that many dioceses lack readily available or reliable records of their Discern-Out Rates. As a result, we calculated these rates for each diocese based on recent historical data they provided. Although these calculations are still estimates, the findings suggest that the national average Discern-Out Rate may be higher than initially reported—possibly closer to 50%. For the purposes of this 2025 report, we will use a more conservative estimate of 40%.

Vocation Ministry continues to study this data, working with more dioceses to refine these estimates and provide a clearer picture of the vocational landscape.

**“Some seed fell on rich soil and produced fruit yielding thirty, sixty, and hundredfold.” - Mark 4:18**

# Marriage

Pope Saint John Paul II’s profound insight that “the family is the seedbed of vocations” reminds us of the essential role families play in nurturing faith, character, and a willingness to follow God’s call. At the heart of every family is the marriage that forms its foundation. When that marriage is strong, grounded in love, faith, and mutual sacrifice, it creates an environment where vocations can flourish.

Conversely, when marriages struggle or faith is not central, families may face challenges in fostering vocations. Pope Saint John Paul II’s vision calls for a renewed focus on strengthening marriages and family life to ensure the Church continues to thrive. By supporting couples in their vocation of marriage, the Church invests in the future of all vocations.

While the main data presented in this report center around priestly vocations, Vocation Ministry has been collecting yearly data that dioceses report to the *Official Catholic Directory* on:

- ◆ Total Catholic marriages (One or both spouses are Catholic)
- ◆ Catholic-to-Catholic marriages (both spouses are Catholic)
- ◆ Interfaith marriages (one spouse is Catholic and one is of a different faith)

Today, about 25% fewer marriages occur in the Catholic Church than 10 years ago (see table 6). Furthermore, a significant change has occurred in the number of interfaith marriages taking place in the Catholic church.

Tier	1	2	3	4
% Change in Total Marriages	-26.8%	-22.8%	-27.1%	-31.5%
% Change in Marriages Between Two Catholics	-23.7%	-21.1%	-21.1%	-20.2%
% Change in Interfaith Marriages	-40.4%	-28.2%	-41.0%	-51.2%

(Table 6)

- ◆ In Tier 1, Catholic-to-Catholic marriages outnumbered interfaith marriages by 4:1 in 2014. This ratio has slowly climbed to 4.5:1 today.
- ◆ In Tier 2, Catholic-to-Catholic marriages outnumbered interfaith marriages by 3:1 in 2014 and that ratio remains the same as today
- ◆ In 2014, Catholic-to-Catholic marriages outnumbered interfaith marriages by a ratio of 2:1 in Tiers 3 and 4. Since then, these two tiers have experienced the most significant shift, with the ratio increasing to 3:1 today.

While various factors may contribute to these results, the available data does not allow for identifying a single primary cause.

Marriage Statistics 2014				
Tier	1	2	3	4
Marriages Between Two Catholics	43,271	33,501	23,891	8,494
Interfaith Marriages	9,966	10,456	10,464	4,869
Total Catholic Marriages	53,237	43,957	34,355	13,363
% Marriages Between Two Catholics	81.3%	76.2%	69.5%	63.6%
% Interfaith Marriages	18.7%	23.8%	30.5%	36.4%

  

Marriage Statistics 2023				
Tier	1	2	3	4
Marriages Between Two Catholics	33,014	26,418	18,858	6,779
Interfaith Marriages	5,939	7,508	6,172	2,376
Total Catholic Marriages	38,953	33,926	25,030	9,155
% Marriages Between Two Catholics	84.8%	77.9%	75.3%	74.0%
% Interfaith Marriages	15.2%	22.1%	24.7%	26.0%

(Table 7)



**“...the family is the  
seedbed of vocations.”**

**- Pope St. John Paul II**

# Correlations

We have now confirmed several of the correlations proposed in our 2023 report. While single year data can give a snapshot of a recent trend, 10-year correlations provide a more reliable view of the significant factors influencing vocation development.

One notable observation was that dioceses where priests serve smaller communities tend to have some of the

highest ordination rates. This is seen in the “Parishioners Each Active Priest Serves Correlation”. Ordination percentages decline when the diocesan average of the number of Catholics a priest serves exceeds 1,800. Clearly, a more personal, community-centered approach to priestly ministry is a key factor in fostering vocations.

## Factors Not Included:

### Catholics Attending Mass

The number of Catholics attending Mass is not reported to the *Official Catholic Directory*, and anecdotal evidence from dioceses we have worked with indicates this figure can vary widely at both the diocesan and parish levels.

- ◆ **Variation by Diocese and Parish:** Some Tier 1 dioceses have reported that Mass attendance rates have fallen below 10%, though rural parishes within these dioceses often report higher attendance compared to urban areas.

Tier 3 and Tier 4 dioceses generally report higher Mass attendance, with some bishops estimating rates between 20-25%.

- ◆ **Regular Mass Attendees:** A priest’s ministry extends far beyond serving regular Mass attendees, encompassing sacramental needs, outreach, and other pastoral responsibilities for the wider Catholic community.
- ◆ **Impact on Vocation Ministry Analysis:** Given the variability and lack of consistent reporting, Vocation Ministry does not incorporate Mass attendance rates into its vocation-related calculations.

# Retirement Rate of Priests

The number of priests nearing retirement age is not formally reported to the *Official Catholic Directory*, but Vocation Ministry's sampling of 25 dioceses provides valuable insights:

- ◆ **Priests Over 60:** On average, dioceses report that approximately 40% of their active priests are over the age of 60.
- ◆ **Range Across Dioceses:** The percentage varies, with one diocese reporting only 19% of priests over 60, while another reported as high as 70%.
- ◆ **Consistent Trends Across Tiers:** This pattern holds steady regardless of the diocese's size or tier classification.

As a significant number of priests approach retirement age in the coming years, dioceses will face increased pressure to ordain more seminarians simply to maintain their current levels of active priests.

Vocation Ministry uses a formula for the Replacement Rate of Priests to account for retirements (see Appendix).

# Priests Leaving the Priesthood

The phenomenon of priests leaving of the priesthood is a critical topic with

far-reaching implications for the vocational health of the Church. When priests leave ministry, the effects can be profound. Parishioners may feel a sense of loss, while clergy often face increased stress, questioning their own vocations or feeling overwhelmed by the added responsibilities of covering multiple parishes or ministries. This additional workload places significant strain on the remaining priests, impacting their ability to effectively serve their communities.

Priests leaving ministry may also point to deeper challenges in areas such as seminary formation, the discernment process, or post-ordination support. These challenges could stem from inadequate preparation for the realities of priestly life, insufficient mentorship, or a lack of robust structures to promote spiritual, emotional, and pastoral well-being. Addressing these factors is vital to fostering a sustainable priestly vocation and ensuring the long-term vitality of diocesan ministry.

Unfortunately, the number of priests leaving the priesthood is not reported to the *Official Catholic Directory*, making it challenging to assess trends or evaluate its scope. This complexity is compounded by inconsistent reporting and the lack of centralized, up-to-date data. While this phenomenon clearly warrants further study, Vocation Ministry has not included it in this report due to the absence of reliable, standardized information.

# Conclusion

The information presented in this report underscores both the challenges and opportunities facing the Church in fostering a culture of vocations.

While some trends are concerning, they should not be viewed as irreversible. The challenges of priestly ministry—whether serving small, tight-knit communities or large, diverse parishes—highlight the importance of intentional engagement, pastoral adaptability, and resource allocation.

The richness of immigrant communities, the dedication of religious and extern priests, and the creative energy of priests committed to youth ministry all serve as reminders that the Church possesses the tools to meet these challenges. However, addressing the realities of declining vocations and overburdened clergy will require innovative approaches and a renewed commitment to building environments where all vocations can flourish.

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Each vocation contributes uniquely to the vitality of the Church, and fostering a culture where all vocations are encouraged and supported is essential. Priests play a pivotal role in nurturing vocations within their parishes, but this effort requires the collaboration of families, educators, and the broader Catholic community. By fostering strong marriages and family life,

promoting awareness of consecrated life, and providing mentorship for those discerning the priesthood, the Church can create a culture where every vocation is valued and nurtured. A collective effort will ensure that

the call to holiness resonates across all states of life, strengthening the Church for generations to come.

By embracing new strategies, prioritizing mentorship, and fostering supportive parish dynamics, dioceses across the United States can stem the tide of decline. This is not a time for resignation but for action. Together, we can create vibrant parishes and dioceses where vocations are not only encouraged but celebrated, ensuring the future vitality of the Church.



# Appendix

## Formulas Used for This Report

**Base Need Ordination Rate**—To determine how many ordinations are needed by dioceses, Vocation Ministry used the average of two factors:

1. Population Factor equals one ordination per 120,000 Catholics in a diocese
2. Replacement Rate of Priests (see below).

**Replacement Rate of Priests**—The replacement rate of priests is the number of ordinations needed annually simply to replace the current number of priests in a diocese. The rate used in this report is 2.7 percent. This rate was arrived at by determining the average years of ministry for priests in the US.

Subtracting the average ordination age of priests (34) from the average retirement age (71), the average length of ministry is 37 years. Considering a priest's length of ministry to be a unit, divide that unit by the number of years. Thus, the annual rate of replacement necessary to retain the current number of priests over a given time period ( $1/37 = 0.027$  or 2.7%).

Thus, if a diocese has 83 priests, each year they will need to ordain an average of 2.241 ( $83 * 0.027$ ) new priests yearly just to replace the current number as they retire.

Depending on a diocese's particular need, a higher replacement rate may be necessary. This calculation does not include other factors of attrition which may cause a decrease in priests, such as a higher than the average normal rate of retirement.

**Base Need Seminarian Rate**—To determine the number of seminarians needed, the Base Need Ordination Rate was multiplied by the average length of seminary formation (seven years), then increased by the average discern-out rate of 40 percent.



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