

PRESS RELEASE



Press Release for The Fourth Sunday of Easter - 17th April 2005 “World Day of Prayer for Vocations”

This Release contains:

- 1) Main Text of the Release
- 2) Tables of statistics and artwork
- 3) Background information on World Day of Prayer for Vocations
- 4) Contacts and links

1) TEXT

Catholic Priesthood – “the glass is half-full” says vocations priest.

Figures released for the World Day of Prayer for Vocations on April 17th, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, show that during Pope John Paul II's pontificate the number of diocesan priests worldwide increased significantly. In 1975 there were 4140 ordinations to the priesthood; by 2000 that number had risen to 6814.

The statistics also show that despite public perception to the contrary, the Catholic Church in England and Wales is still relatively well-off for priests when viewed alongside the Catholic population of the country as a whole.

Father Paul Embery from the English and Welsh Catholic Bishops' Office for Vocation said “The statistics make interesting reading. Contrary to what is often believed, today we are still better off for priests than many of our predecessors were for a good part of the 1800's, but we do still want more priests. However, I prefer to look at the glass as being half-full rather than half- empty”.

The figures, which cover the last 150 years, show that in 1871 the ratio of priests to people was 1 priest for every 774 Catholics; today it is very similar at 1 for 750.

During the peak of Irish immigration in the 1840's, the number of priests did not keep up with the growth of the population, and at one stage there was only 1 priest for every 1200 Catholics. Conversely, in 1941 the ratio fell to a low of 1 priest to every 411 Catholics, this time helped by a large number of young priests who came from Ireland.

This year 27 men entered seminary to begin priestly formation for dioceses in England and Wales and it is likely that there will be 32 ordinations in 2005, equivalent to just over one priest per diocese.

There is still a statistical availability of 1.5 priests per parish, a similar figure for the period 1861-1891. However in some parishes parishioners are now having to share priests with other Catholic churches in the area. One of the reasons why this has become necessary is that some priests now work fulltime in the armed services, prisons, schools and universities, not just parishes, reflecting a changing pastoral situation.

The figures also show that since 1970 the number of priests in England and Wales has fallen by some 25%. This is also true of many other countries in the developed world.

“Whilst we celebrate the worldwide increase in the number of priests, we are not complacent about the situation here.” said Father Paul Embery. “We have a particular challenge in the West to analyse our situation and to identify an appropriate pastoral response”. Asked if one of the problems might be the rule of priestly celibacy, he replied, “We need to look at this globally. We can’t just change things to suit our own situation in the United Kingdom, the United States and Western Europe. They may be other things we need to consider such as the impact of material goods, hedonism, the place faith occupies in our society and also the way we portray the life and work of priests.”

Perhaps because of his own personal experiences as a young man, a care for young people was central to John Paul II’s papacy. His mother died when he was very young and his training for the priesthood took place underground during the Nazi occupation of Poland. As a young priest and bishop he also lived under the Communist regime. Understandably, the struggle for true personal freedom was an integral part of Pope John Paul’s philosophy, not least because such freedom is a prerequisite to be able to properly recognise and respond to God’s call in life.

In a letter for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, written before he died, the Pope called on young people to “put out into the deep”. This quote, the theme for this year’s World Day of Prayer for Vocations is taken from Chapter 5 of Saint Luke’s Gospel when Jesus invites the fishermen to lower their nets in deep water. He also challenges adult members of the Church “to implement an extensive plan of vocational promotion, based on personal contact and involving parishes, schools, and families in an effort to foster a more attentive reflection on life’s essential values”.

Commenting on this Father Paul Embery said, “Now that the Holy Father is no longer with us and we are in unfamiliar territory, his words seem all the more relevant. We are especially challenged at this present moment to ‘put out into the deep’ as we do not know exactly what the future will hold for the Church – this is an exciting time to be a Catholic and to be considering priesthood and religious life”.

Paying tribute to the Holy Father, Father Paul said “Despite the very difficult circumstances of his youth, Karol Wojtyla responded with generosity and courage to the call of God in his life. During his 58 years as a priest, he remained faithful to his calling and has inspired many young people to explore their own Christian vocation, including priesthood and religious life”.

“I hope that even now, in death, his model of fidelity in vocation will inspire young men and women to consider the adventure that God offers us in life if we embrace the vocational journey he invites us to undertake. As a young man Pope John Paul would have had little idea that his life would turn out to be so significant, both for the Church and for the world as a whole. He was an example of how God often calls ordinary people to do extraordinary things”.

2) Statistics and artwork.

Worldwide ordinations to Secular Priesthood 1970 -2000

Years	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000
Total secular Ordinations	4622	4140	3860	4822	5938	6444	6814
Europe	2548	1966	1682	2097	2456	2475	2321
Latin America	414	536	528	911	1246	1454	1685
Africa	197	284	397	492	716	939	1177
Asia	508	447	562	645	959	1041	1094
North America	890	835	648	612	517	489	471
Oceania	65	71	43	65	44	46	66

Source: Congregation for the
Clergy

Statistics of Catholic Population, Clergy and Mass Centres in England and Wales 1841-2001

Year	Total RC Population		Number of priests	Number of Mass Centres	Ratio of RC Pop. to priests	No of priests per Mass Centre
1841	500000	est	561	474	891/1	1.18
1851	1000000	est	826	597	1211/1	1.38
1861	1100000	est	1165	798	944/1	1.46
1871	1200000	est	1551	947	774/1	1.64
1881	1300000	est	1979	1175	657/1	1.68
1891	1400000	est	2498	1335	560/1	1.87
1901	1500000		2856	1536	525/1	1.86
1911	1700000		3766	1773	451/1	2.12
1921	1900000		3989	1932	476/1	2.06
1931	2200000		4484	2228	491/1	2.01
1941	2400000		5839	2580	411/1	2.26
1951	2800000		6728	2910	416/1	2.31
1961	3500000		7465	4258	469/1	1.75
1971	4000000		7618	3772	525/1	2.02
1981	4300000		7016	3775	613/1	1.86
1991	4300000		6261	4016	687/1	1.56
2001	4200000		5600	3673	750/1	1.52

Sources: Catholic Directory & Dr. Gareth Leyshon's "Priests and Population in Eng & Wales 1841-2001"

Note 1: Accurate Catholic population figures 1841-1891 are not readily available. Estimates are based on those in Herbert Thurston's "Statistical Progress of the Catholic Church" [1929]. Irish immigration roughly doubled Catholic population figures in the decade 1840-1850.

Note 2: 'Priests' includes diocesan and religious priests

3) BACKGROUND BRIEFING

Each year in the Catholic cycle of readings for Mass, the Gospel reading for the Fourth Sunday of Easter is that of the Good Shepherd. This particular Sunday each year is a special day of prayer for vocations to priesthood, diaconate and religious life.

For April 17th 2005, Pope John Paul II selected the gospel text “put out into the deep” (Luke Chapter 5, verse 4) as a theme for this year’s World Day of Prayer for Vocations. In a letter sent out to the Church several months ago, he challenges both young people and adults to trust in God and not to be afraid of stepping into unfamiliar territory, just as the fishermen-disciples were called to do.

The Pope also acknowledged the particular problem of “personal non-commitment in the face of difficulties”. This is a theme also mentioned in his 1992 Apostolic Exhortation about Priesthood (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*- Shepherds I will give you). This is particularly poignant at the present moment at the Church reflects of the papacy of Pope John Paul and the faithful witness he gave over 58 years as a priest and the difficulties he experienced becoming a priest as a young person.



Artwork for Fourth Sunday of Easter

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4) Contacts

Further comment available from:

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Web Links:

www.ukpriest.org

www.ukvocation.org

Seminaries:

We have seminaries in London, Durham, Birmingham, Surrey, Rome and Valladolid (Spain). If required, it might be possible to set interviews up with seminary staff and some of those training to be priests. Details from: enquiries@ukvocation.org or telephone 020 8458 6017