

New Church statistics reveal growing Catholic population, fewer pastoral workers.

<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2025-03/pontifical-yearbook-2025-priests-religious-statistics.html>

The Vatican's Central Office of Church Statistics releases the 2025 Pontifical Yearbook providing details about the number of Catholics, consecrated religious, priests, and bishops throughout the world.

By Vatican News

The Vatican Publishing House (LEV) has published the Pontifical Yearbook 2025 and the *Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae* 2023, which was compiled by the Central Office of Church Statistics, a department of the Secretariat of State.

The data reported in the Pontifical Yearbook offers information regarding the life of the Catholic Church worldwide for 2024. During this period, one ecclesiastical province was created; three episcopal sees were elevated to Metropolitan Sees; seven new dioceses were established; one episcopal see was elevated to an archdiocese, and an Apostolic Administration was elevated to a diocese.

The *Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae* offers a snapshot of the main quantitative phenomena concerning the pastoral activity of the Catholic Church worldwide, including statistical insights for the biennium 2022–2023.

Global Catholic population.

The global Catholic population increased by 1.15% between 2022 and 2023, rising from approximately 1.39 billion to 1.406 billion, a percentage very similar to that of the previous biennium. The distribution of baptized Catholics varies in the various geographic areas, in accordance with the different demographics of each continent.

Africa includes 20% of the Catholics of the entire planet and is characterized by a highly dynamic spread of the Catholic Church. The number of Catholics increased from 272 million in 2022 to 281 million in 2023, with a relative variation of +3.31%. The Democratic Republic of Congo confirms its first-place position for the number of baptized Catholics, with almost 55 million, followed by Nigeria with 35 million; Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya also register significant figures.

With a growth of 0.9% over the biennium, the Americas consolidate their position as the continents to which 47.8% of the world's Catholics belong. Of these, 27.4% reside in South America (where Brazil, with 182 million, represents 13% of the world total and continues to be

the country with the highest concentration of Catholics), 6.6% in North America, and the remaining 13.8% in Central America. When the number of Catholics is compared to the total population, Argentina, Colombia, and Paraguay stand out, with a Catholic incidence exceeding 90% of the population.

The Asian continent records a growth of Catholics of 0.6% over the biennium, and its weight in 2023 is around 11% of the global Catholic population. In 2023, 76.7% of Southeast Asian Catholics are concentrated in the Philippines, with 93 million, and in India, with 23 million.

Europe, while hosting 20.4% of the world Catholic community, confirms itself as the least dynamic area, with an increase in the number of Catholics over the biennium of just 0.2%. This variation, on the other hand, in the face of an almost stagnant demographic dynamic, translates into a slight improvement in territorial presence, which reaches nearly 39.6% in 2023. Italy, Poland, and Spain boast a Catholic incidence exceeding 90% of the resident population.

The Catholics of Oceania numbered just over 11 million in 2023, an increase of 1.9% compared to 2022.

Growing number of bishops.

The number of bishops in the Catholic Church has grown over the last biennium with an overall variation of 1.4%, rising from 5,353 in 2022 to 5,430 in 2023. This growth trend is observed in all continents, with the exception of Oceania, where the number of bishops has not changed over the biennium.

The relative variation is somewhat more pronounced for Africa and Asia and below the world average for Europe and America. It can also be noted that the relative weight of each continent remains nearly unchanged during the period, proportional to the relative importance of the individual continental realities, with a greater concentration of bishops

in America and Europe. In Africa, the share of bishops in the world total rises from 13.8% in 2022 to 14.2% in 2023.

The number of Catholics per bishop in 2023 varied significantly from continent to continent. While the global average is 259,000 Catholics per bishop, values of 365,000 and 334,000 are recorded for Africa and America, respectively. Particularly favourable is the situation in Oceania, where each bishop is responsible for 87,000 Catholics, which, from this point of view, indicates a slight excess of bishops compared to other continents.

Fewer priests.

At the end of 2023, within the 3,041 ecclesiastical jurisdictions in the Catholic world, there were 406,996 priests, with a decrease of 734 compared to 2022, equivalent to -0.2%. The analysis by geographical area highlights an increase in Africa (+2.7%) and Asia (+1.6%) and a decrease in Europe (-1.6%), in Oceania (-1.0%), and in America (-0.7%).

In addition to the continents, a comparison of the distinction between diocesan and religious priests reveals that, in Asia and Africa, the overall increase in priests is attributable to the dynamics of both diocesan and religious priests.

In Africa, in particular, the overall increase in priests' results from an increase of approximately 3.3% in diocesan priests and 1.4% in religious priests. On the American continents, the increase in diocesan clergy over the biennium stands out in Central and Latin America. In Europe, however, a reduction of 1.6% is observed both overall and in its individual components (diocesan and religious); the same pattern, though with a smaller decline (-1.0%), is observed in Oceania.

The distribution in 2023 by geographical area highlights that while 38.1% of the total priests are in Europe, 29.1% belong to the American continents, while the other continental areas follow with 18.2% in Asia, 13.5% in Africa, and 1.1% in Oceania.

The structural analysis of priests can be supplemented with that of Catholics to highlight any imbalances between the demand and supply of pastoral service. In the case of a perfect balance between the presence and the need for pastoral activity, the percentage composition of priests should coincide, for each territorial area examined, with that of

Catholics. In reality, a comparison between the percentage composition of priests and Catholics shows that in 2023, significant discrepancies were recorded.

In particular, the percentages of priests exceed those of Catholics in North America (10.3% of priests compared to 6.6% of Catholics), in Europe (38.1% of priests and 20.4% of Catholics), and in Oceania (1.1% of priests and 0.8% of Catholics). The most evident shortages of priests are found in South America (12.4% of priests and 27.4% of Catholics), in Africa (13.5% of priests and 20.0% of Catholics), and in the Central Continental region of the Americas (5.4% of priests and 11.6% of Catholics).

Larger cohort of permanent deacons.

Permanent deacons constitute the group of clergy that is growing most vigorously. In 2023, their number reached 51,433 compared to the 50,150 recorded in 2022, with an increase of 2.6%.

Territorial disparities remain pronounced: significant growth rates are observed in Oceania (+10.8%) and the Americas (+3.8%), while slight declines are recorded in Africa and Europe. No significant changes in the global distribution of deacons are noted during the biennium considered, except for a decrease in the relative number of deacons in Europe and an increase in that of America, mainly due to substantial growth in North America. This category of pastoral worker is particularly present in the Americas (especially in North America, which accounts for 39% of all deacons worldwide) and also in Europe (31%).

To highlight the supportive role of these workers in pastoral action alongside priests, one can consider the ratio of the number of permanent deacons, area by area, to the number of priests present. It is found that the worldwide distribution of deacons per one hundred priests is 13 in 2023, ranging from a minimum of just 0.5 in Asia to a maximum of 29 in the Americas. In Europe, the ratio is around 10, while in Africa, only one permanent deacon serves alongside every one hundred priests.

The magnitude of this index, although appreciable, is still quite modest for permanent deacons to have a significant impact on balancing the demand and supply of service to Catholics in the territory. However, in evolutionary terms, it is noted that permanent

deacons tend to have a greater presence in those areas where candidates for the priesthood are lower in number.

Slower rate of decline in the number of consecrated religious.

The reduction of both professed religious brothers who are not priests and professed religious sisters, which has occurred over time, continued in 2023, albeit at a less intense pace.

In particular, it should be noted that regarding professed religious brothers who are not priests, while an increase was recorded in Africa between 2022 and 2023, all other continents experienced a decline. It is worth emphasizing that the decline in South America has slowed compared to the average annual decrease of the previous period and that a state of stability is observed even in Central America. The relative weight of professed religious brothers who are not priests in the various areas, when considered over time, confirms the decline in Europe, which continues to decrease in 2023.

The decline in the number of professed religious sisters also continued in 2023. At the global level, their number decreased from 599,228 in 2022 to 589,423 in 2023, with a relative variation of -1.6%. Regarding their geographical distribution in 2023, nearly 32% reside in Europe, followed

by Asia with 30%, the Americas with 23% (evenly distributed across the two hemispheres), Africa with 14%, and Oceania with 1%.

The decline in the number of professed religious sisters worldwide is largely attributable to a considerable increase in deaths, resulting from a high proportion of elderly religious sisters, while the number of those abandoning religious life has become less significant over the biennium.

Africa recorded a significant increase of 2.2% between 2022 and 2023, followed by Southeast Asia with +0.1%. North America, on the other hand, saw a decline of -3.6%. South America followed closely, with -3%, while the decline recorded in the Central Continental region of the Americas and the Central Antilles was more moderate. Europe holds the negative record, with a variation of -3.8%.

These movements naturally influence changes in the continental proportions of the total number of professed religious sisters. A reduction in the presence of religious sisters in

Europe and North America is observed in the 2022-2023 period, to the benefit of Asia and Africa. Specifically, while in 2022 the total number of professed religious sisters in Europe and the Americas accounted for 55.8% of the world total, in 2023 this percentage dropped to 54.8%. The most significant changes in the period were observed in Southeast Asia (from 28.7% to 29.2%) and in Africa (from 13.9% to 14.5%).

Professed religious sisters remain a substantial reality, despite the globally observed decline and that in some continental regions. The total number of religious sisters is 45% higher than the priestly population. Even though their statistical role in service provision has generally declined over the years, their contribution to the life of the Christian community remains essential, sometimes even substituting for that of priests.

Continued reduction in numbers of seminarians.

The temporal trend observed worldwide in the number of major seminarians indicates an uninterrupted decline that has been recorded since 2012.

In terms of total numbers, candidates for the priesthood decreased globally from 108,481 in 2022 to 106,495 in 2023, with a variation of -1.8%. The decline observed in the global total affects all continents except Africa, where seminarians increased by 1.1% (from 34,541 to 34,924). In Europe, Asia, and the Americas, but especially in the first continent, the decreases are significant (-4.9% in Europe, -4.2% in Asia, and -1.3% in the Americas). In Oceania, the trend is negative but of minor magnitude.

The percentage distribution of major seminarians by continent shows modest changes over the biennium. Africa and Asia contributed 61.0% of the world total in 2022, a percentage that rose to 61.4% in 2023. Apart from a slight negative adjustment in Oceania, the Americas and Europe together saw their share decrease. In 2022, American and European seminarians totalled 41,199, representing almost 38% of the world total, while one year later, they dropped to 37.7%.

To highlight the positive and negative surpluses of vocations at the territorial level, it is useful to compare the percentage distribution of seminarians with the corresponding distribution of Catholics. It follows that in 2023, significant disparities were recorded.

The percentages of seminarians exceed those of Catholics in Africa (32.8% of seminarians compared to 20% of Catholics) and in Asia (28.6% of seminarians and 11% of Catholics). These continents thus tend to fully meet the need to autonomously sustain their local apostolate.

In Europe and America, however, the percentages of seminarians are lower than those of Catholics (12.0% of seminarians and 20.4% of Catholics in Europe and 25.7% of seminarians and 47.8% of Catholics in the Americas). In these two continents, therefore, it is more difficult to adequately respond to the needs of the Catholic population, particularly in terms of generational turnover in the priesthood.