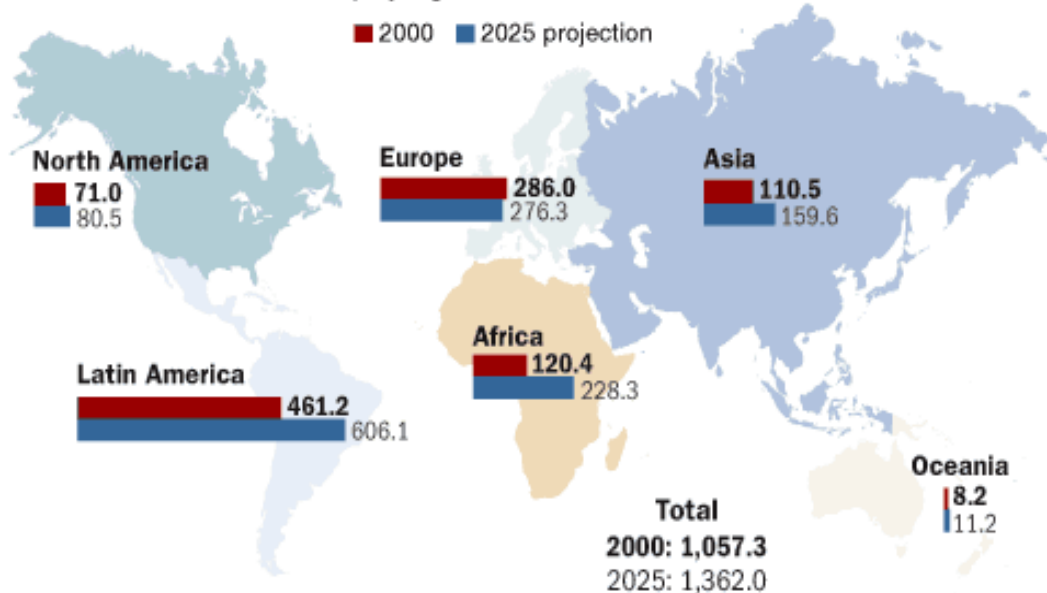


A GLOBAL COMMUNITY

Estimated Catholic Church membership by region, in millions



As of Friday, October 17, 2003

Immigration Transforms Catholic Church in the U.S.

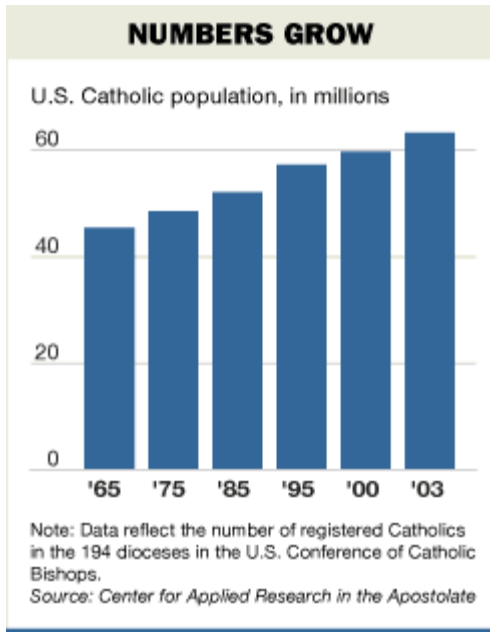
By MATT MURRAY
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The U.S. branch of the Roman Catholic Church has reached a delicate turning point, grappling with dramatic changes in its makeup and practices because of immigration, a steep decline in clergymen, and continuing fallout from the pedophile scandals.

Immigration poses the biggest challenges. **Church officials estimate that 300,000 baptized Catholics arrive in the U.S. every year from places like Latin America, Vietnam and the Philippines -- a figure roughly equivalent to the size of one middle-sized diocese.** While that is keeping the church growing, the influx of immigrants is beginning to strain resources and stir conflicts with longtime parishioners as parishes add foreign-language masses and bring in new priests.

The influx is also reproducing on a micro-scale the tensions being felt by the church globally, because **newcomers often bring a more conservative theology, veneration for saints from their homes and a desire to incorporate their own cultural traditions in liturgy.**

"It can be very exciting, but it is challenging," says the Rev. Don Romito, who until being reassigned this year spent 10 years as pastor at St. Columban parish in Garden Grove, Calif., a period when attendance at weekend masses doubled to about 10,000 because of an increase in Hispanics and Vietnamese. "Left to



their own devices, the Vietnamese would rather be by themselves, the Anglos would rather be by themselves and the Spanish would rather be by themselves," he says. Long-time parishioners often say, "What happened to our church? I've been here 40 years and this is my church," he adds.

At times church leaders face conflicts among the immigrant groups themselves. Elsewhere in Orange County, Hispanic parishioners at a small, crowded parish formerly known as Our Lady of Lourdes have balked at plans to build a new church because the bishop, Tod D. Brown, wants to replace their pastor with one who speaks Vietnamese. Construction has been delayed on the new church for the parish -- now named Our Lady of Lavang, after a vision of the Virgin Mary that appeared at the end of the 18th century to persecuted Vietnamese Catholics.

Such cultural conflicts could increase as the wave of immigration alters the clerical ranks. **Hispanics now account for 40% of U.S. church membership, and the**

church leadership will see a "shift from an Irish-dominated church to a Hispanic one," says Prof. Lamin Sanneh of Yale University Divinity School. He says the change will affect everything from the theological emphasis in seminaries to styles of worship.

Meanwhile, the strains on priests are growing as their ranks continue to decline. **The number of priests in the U.S. has dropped to 43,634 from 58,632 in 1965, while the Catholic population has grown to 63.4 million from 45.6 million.** Ordinations have dropped to 441 a year from 994 over the same period.

Seven years ago, the diocese of Green Bay, Wis., had about 185 priests serving 200 parishes, says Mark Magilka, director of pastoral services for the diocese. By this year, the numbers had dropped to 125 priests in 185 parishes.

In Green Bay, as elsewhere, much of the slack is being taken up by lay ministers and administrators. **Nationally there are estimated to be more than 30,000 lay ministers working at least part-time in Catholic parishes, handling duties that used to be performed by priests.**

The shifting burden often means that priests play less of a daily role in the lives of parishioners and are increasingly becoming "ministers to the ministers," with the primary job of hiring and managing others, Mr. Magilka says. "Some of our priests have as many as five parishes they are responsible for," he adds.

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