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The CARA Report

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Looking at Catholics by Generation

CARA's senior researcher Mark Gray has concluded that we are at a point in 2026 where we can confidently report survey findings about the youngest (and oldest) American Catholic adult generations. To do so, we use the Pew Research Center's generational definitions: Silent Generation (born 1928–1945), Baby Boomers (1946–1964), Generation X (1965–1980), Millennials (1981–1996), and Generation Z (1997 onward, of whom we can only “see” those age 18 and above in 2024).

To put this analysis in context by population, we provide the size summary for each adult Catholic generation in 2024. These estimates, and other data in the report, are derived from the *Cooperative Election Study (CES)* and *General Social Study (GSS)* in 2024, to which was then applied the appropriate Census estimates for the 2024 adult population.

The largest generation of Catholics is the Baby Boomers, making up 33 percent of adult Catholics (17.2 million people). This is followed by Gen X (25 percent/13.1 million people), Millennials (24 percent/12.7 million people), and Gen Z aged 18 or older in 2024 (13 percent/7.1 million people). The Silent Generation makes up 5 percent of adult Catholics

(2.8 million people). These totals do not include Catholics younger than 18 or older than 94 in 2024.

Turning first to religious practice in 2024, 36 percent of adult Catholics attended Mass at least once a month, 65 percent prayed at least once a week, and 76 percent said their religion is “somewhat” or “very” important to them. Mass attendance—at least once a month among the youngest group, Gen Z Catholics—was *higher* than it was for older Gen X or Baby Boomer Catholics (39 percent compared to 30 percent and 35 percent, respectively). However, Gen Z were less likely than older Catholics to pray at least weekly and to say that their religion is “somewhat” or “very” important to them.

Retention rates measure the percentage of adults who were raised Catholic and who still identify as Catholic when surveyed as adults. Among Baby Boomers, retention ranged from 68 percent to 62 percent between 2014 and 2024. Gen X similarly varied from a high of 70 percent to a low of 60 percent. The trend for Millennials mirrors that of Gen X, ranging from 64 percent to 53 percent. Gen Z has only been visible in large enough numbers in the GSS since 2021, with a 67 percent retention rate that fell to 52 percent in 2024. Thus, only about half of Gen Z who were raised as Catholic remain Catholic as adults.

One aspect where significant change is evident across generations is racial and ethnic diversity. Forty percent of Gen Z Catholics self-identify as Hispanic or Latino compared to 18 percent of Baby Boomer Catholics. A minority of Gen Z and Millennial Catholics self-identifies as non-Hispanic White. The number of Catholics who self-identify as something other than Hispanic or non-Hispanic White is also larger among Millennials and Gen Z than older Catholics.

Overall, in 2024, adult Catholics were 33 percent Democrat, 24 percent Republican, and 43 percent independent, affiliated with some other political party, or unsure of their party affiliation. Gen Z Catholics were a bit more Democratic (36 percent) and a bit less Republican (19

percent). The most Republican segment of Catholics was Baby Boomers (25 percent) and Gen X (26 percent). All generations were more likely to be Democrats than Republicans, and all have a plurality who do not affiliate with either major party.

Turning to media use, 80 percent of Catholics overall use social media daily and 67 percent watch television news. Fewer read a daily newspaper or listen to news radio daily, 34 percent for both. There are significant differences by generation for media use. Ninety-five percent of Gen Z uses social media daily. Daily social media use decreases with each older generation, from 87 percent of Millennials to 62 percent of Silent Generation Catholics. Only Silent Generation and Baby Boomer Catholics are more likely to use something other than social media daily, and that is television news (83 percent and 75 percent, respectively). There is fairly consistent use of newspaper readership (including online) and listening to news on the radio across generations.

Next, we look at economic indicators that may be affecting younger Americans. Overall, 15 percent of adult Catholics have student debt, 13 percent wouldn't be able to pay for an emergency expense of \$400 right now, and 15 percent have earned money by taking jobs through a website or mobile app in the last year (e.g., gig work). Younger Catholics are more likely to have student debt, with one-third of Gen Z reporting this. Gen X Catholics indicate they would be least able to pay for an emergency expense right now (17 percent). The likelihood of doing gig work is highest among Millennials (25 percent) and Gen Z (32 percent).

Finally, we examine self-reported health. Eighty-three percent of Catholics describe their health as good to excellent. Just 17 percent describe it as fair or poor. Fifty-nine percent of Gen Z say their health is excellent or very good, as do 53 percent of Millennial Catholics. Even among the oldest generation of Catholics, the Silent Generation, 83 percent describe their health as good to excellent.

"Talking About Your Generation," by Mark M. Gray, March 23, 2026, appears in 1964, The CARA Blog (nineteensixty-four.blogspot.com).

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All About Catholic Youth and Young Adult Ministry

One of today's most discussed religion topics in secular and religious media is a reported surge in both interest in and conversion to the Catholic Church among young Americans. This is therefore the perfect time for the appearance of an authoritative and comprehensive study on ministry to this reportedly fast-growing group, *Illuminating Trends: A Study of Pastoral Leaders Serving Catholic Youth & Young Adults 2000–2025*.

The 75-page report shares findings from 25 years of longitudinal research on the population of pastoral ministers who lead ministry with youth and young adults in the Catholic Church in the United States. Its synthesis reflects what stands out across the decades: where patterns of consistency have endured, where meaningful growth has occurred, and where signs of decline or challenge have emerged. Examining these trends provides a deeper understanding of how this evolving field has changed and what remains vital for sustaining effective ministry leadership into the future for the Church's mission to youth and young adults. The following is a summary of the report's "Synthesis of Longitudinal Research Conclusions."

1. Professionalization: Role Formalization Still Lags. Over the past 25 years, credentials and experience have grown, yet employment practices have not kept pace. There have been documented declines in contracts, job descriptions, and reviews for full-time parish leaders, even as the scope and expectations of their roles expanded.

2. Gender Pay Gap: A Persistent Inequity. Women are still paid less than men in comparable roles, a statistically significant disparity that

persists into the most recent period, even where degrees and experience are held constant.

3. Formation First: Practical, Accessible Preparation Needed. While more leaders now hold degrees, many still lack formal ministry preparation, and diocesan formation opportunities have declined. Many express the significance of the lack of training for their ministry.

4. Role Creep and Multi-Audience Portfolios. Responsibilities have expanded (youth, young adults, confirmation, multiple parishes), often without added pay or training. Leaders report being “on all the time,” with administration and communications crowding out relational ministry.

5. People Power: Recruitment as the Choke Point. Recruiting adult volunteers and consistently engaging youth and young adults have been and remain top past obstacles. Leaders link recruitment challenges to cultural secularization, parental priorities, and leader overload.

6. Pastor-Minister Partnership: The Make-or-Break Factor. Pastors frequently invite leaders into ministry, and shared vision with the pastor correlates with thriving programs. However, misalignment with this relationship or pastor transitions often trigger leaders exiting and programs collapsing.

7. Stability and Succession: Shorter Horizons. Intent-to-stay horizons have shortened for many younger leaders and are shorter among younger generations than they were among older ones at the same age. Frequent turnovers, disrupting trust and continuity in ministry, are real concerns for these leaders.

8. Reinventing the Model: Accompaniment Forward. Over the years, there have been clear shifts, from relational group models to large program-driven models, and now back to more relational, accompaniment-based ministry. Ministry is now shifting toward small-

scale accompaniment, although it has not been widely adopted as a ministry practice.

9. Measuring What Matters: Depth Over Headcount. Across studies, pastoral leaders argue that success must prioritize transformation over attendance. Numbers alone undervalue intensive, high-impact work with smaller groups and individual young people.

10. Representation: Leader Diversity Lags Youth Demographics.

Despite modest gains over the last 25 years, leadership does not yet reflect the racial and cultural diversity of the young Church. For example, Hispanic leaders represent only 22 percent in the survey versus 55 percent among Gen Z Catholics.

11. Need for Ongoing Research: Collaboration and National Database.

Across multiple studies, there has been a recurring call for establishing mechanisms to facilitate regular salary and benefit reporting, along with more research to guide policy decisions and strengthen advocacy within the field.

12. Education Level: Remains Consistent at Bachelor's Level with

Master's Degrees Rising with Time in Role. Younger cohorts keep the field's strong bachelor's profile. Gen Z has high bachelor degree rates (64 percent) but much lower master's degrees so far (9 percent), below where Gen X sat at a comparable early career point.

13. Generational Trend: Vocational Uncertainty Increases among

Younger Leaders. The trend in the more recent studies of Gen Z and Millennial leaders expresses the lowest long-term intent to stay in ministry, citing work-life balance, financial considerations, and unclear career paths. This suggests a looming leadership gap unless these pressures are addressed.

Illuminating Trends: A Study of Pastoral Leaders Serving Catholic Youth & Young Adults 2000–2025, by Charlotte McCorquodale, was published in 2025 by Ministry Training Source (ministrytrainingsource.org).

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CARA Board Member Appointed New Bishop of West Virginia by Pope Leo XIV

The Most Reverend Evelio Menjivar-Ayala was installed as Bishop of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston in West Virginia on July 2, 2026.

Bishop Menjivar is the first native of El Salvador to become a bishop in the United States. He completed his seminary education at the Pontifical North American College in Rome; was ordained to the priesthood on May 29, 2004; and was consecrated a bishop on February 21, 2023. He was an auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Washington from 2023 to 2026 and has been a member of the CARA Board of Directors since 2023.

Notably, he was smuggled into this country with his brother in the trunk of a car in 1990, on his third try at entry. As described in an article *in The Washington Post* for May 2, “He will replace retiring West Virginia Bishop Mark Brennan, who in a twist of fate helped Menjivar secure a Green Card years ago. At the time, Brennan headed the priest-recruiting office for the Washington Archdiocese and saw Menjivar as a promising candidate who needed to fix his immigration status.” Bishop Menjivar became an American citizen in 2006.

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Black Catholics in the United States

For Black History Month, CARA researcher Ali Mumbach reviewed data on Black Catholics from the *General Social Survey (GSS)* and *Cooperative Election Study (CES)*.

The Black Catholic population has remained stable over the past five decades in the United States. Of adult Catholics in the United States, 5 percent self-identify as Black or African American; of Black or African Americans, 7.5 percent identify as Catholic, resulting in about 1 percent of the overall U.S. adult population identifying as Black and Catholic (about 2.8 million individuals). The term “Black Catholic” encompasses the diaspora of African and African-descended peoples: African Americans, African immigrants, Afro-Latinos, and Afro-Caribbeans. Black Catholics are far from monolithic in their cultural expressions and experiences of the faith and society.

Within the Black Catholic population, 55 percent identify as men and 45 percent as women. The average age is 44. The largest generational cohort is Millennials (43 percent), followed by Baby Boomers (22 percent), Gen X (18 percent), Gen Z (17 percent), and the Silent Generation (<1 percent). Although young adults reportedly make up the largest segment of Black Catholics, the author notes that they are not often seen at services. The reason for this discrepancy is an opportunity for further research.

Black Catholics live predominantly in the South (55 percent). They are also distributed among the Northeast (21 percent), Midwest (11 percent), and West (13 percent). Regarding political party affiliation, Black Catholics lean heavily Democrat (59 percent), with the remainder being Independent (22 percent), Republican (13 percent), or Other (1 percent).

Black Catholics report a higher Mass attendance than the overall Catholic population (40 percent versus 26 percent in weekly attendance). Over half of Black Catholics pray daily compared to the overall Catholic population (55 percent versus 47 percent). Black Catholics demonstrate a strong commitment to the faith they believe in, even as dioceses disproportionately close Black Catholic parishes and schools, which tend to be located in poorer urban areas or in areas experiencing overall declines in Catholic population.

Because this research occurred in conjunction with the 100th anniversary of Black History Month, the author selected a number of questions from the 2024 CES to analyze about race and racism. These questions touch on topics that will be explored in an upcoming CARA national survey. Following is a summary of comparative responses from Black and White Catholics who *agreed* with the following statements:

- White people in the United States have certain advantages because of the color of their skin: Black (80 percent agreed), White (38 percent agreed).
- Racial problems in the United States are rare, isolated situations: Black (14 percent), White (36 percent).
- Irish, Italians, Jews, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors: Black (39 percent), White (64 percent).
- Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class: Black (74 percent), White (32 percent).
- I resent when Whites deny the existence of racial discrimination: Black (76 percent), White (30 percent).
- Whites get away with offenses that African Americans would never get away with: Black (76 percent), White (28 percent).
- Whites do not go to great lengths to understand the problems African Americans face: Black (74 percent), White (30 percent).

This analysis demonstrates that Black and White Catholics differ significantly on their beliefs about race and racism. The goal here is not to create greater division within the Body of Christ, but rather to illuminate how wide the chasm is in acknowledgement and understanding. The Catholic Church has a very definitive teaching on racism: it is an evil and a sin. However, the U.S. Catholic Church also has a history of instituting and perpetuating this sin against its own members. In this period of synodality, the responses from Black

Catholics are loud and clear. It is out of love and commitment to the Gospel that the Church is responsible to listen.

"Black Catholics in the United States," by Ali Mumbach, February 27, 2026, appears in 1964, The CARA Blog (nineteensixty-four.blogspot.com).

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CARA Briefs

MUST PEOPLE BELIEVE IN GOD TO BE MORAL AND HAVE GOOD VALUES?

According to results of the *Pew Global Attitudes Study* of 2025, "In some countries—including the United States—declining shares of people say it's necessary to believe in God to be moral and have good values." Historically, "From 2002 through 2011, Americans were split fairly evenly or tilted toward the view that people need to believe in God to be moral and have good values. Starting in 2014, however, Americans have been more likely to say the opposite."

"In just the past three years (from 2022 to 2025), 11 countries have seen a decline in the percentage of adults who say it's necessary to believe in God to be moral and have good values. This includes a 16-percentage point drop in Germany, where 21 percent of adults currently hold this view, down from 37 percent in 2022."

"In some countries, the most recent comparable survey is from 2019. In four of these countries (Argentina, Brazil, Nigeria, and South Africa), the share of adults who connect belief in God with morality has declined. In three others (Kenya, Mexico, and Turkey), views have not changed. Only two surveyed countries—India and Indonesia—have seen an increase in the portion of people who say it's necessary to believe in God to be moral."

The following indicates the percentages of respondents in selected world areas who say it is *not* necessary to believe in God to be moral:

- **North America:** Canada (77 percent), United States (68 percent)
- **Europe:** Sweden (89 percent), Spain (84 percent), France (83 percent), Netherlands (81 percent), Poland (80 percent), Germany (78 percent), U.K. (77 percent), Italy (74 percent), Hungary (73 percent), Greece (70 percent)
- **Asia:** Australia (89 percent), Japan (62 percent), South Korea (52 percent), India (13 percent), Indonesia (1 percent)
- **Middle-East:** Israel (63 percent), Turkey (22 percent)
- **Africa:** Nigeria (23 percent), South Africa (19 percent), Kenya (6 percent)
- **Latin America:** Argentina (55 percent), Mexico (47 percent), Brazil (26 percent)

"In the U.S. and Other Countries, Fewer People Now Say It's Necessary to Believe in God to Be Moral," by Jonathan Evans, March 5, 2026, appears on the website of the Pew Research Center (pewresearch.org).

Who Believes in Heaven and Hell?

Researcher Ryan Burge of Washington University in St. Louis has studied where members of major U.S. religious communities—or of no religion at all—stand on the existence of heaven or hell. Using data from the 2023–2024 *Pew Religious Landscape Survey*, he found the following:

- **Those who believe people have a soul or spirit in addition to their physical body:** Evangelical Protestants (98 percent), Latter-day Saints (97 percent), Black Protestants (97 percent), Catholics (95 percent), Mainline Protestants (95 percent), Buddhists (91 percent), Muslims (90 percent), Orthodox Christians (88 percent), Hindus (86 percent), Nothing in particular (80 percent), Jews (75 percent), Agnostics (69 percent), Atheists (33 percent)
- **Overall Catholic responses on heaven and hell:** Believe in both heaven and hell (71 percent), neither heaven nor hell (11 percent), heaven only (18 percent), hell only (1 percent)
- **Catholics who believe in hell by church attendance:** More than weekly (92 percent), Weekly (84 percent), Monthly (76 percent), Yearly (69 percent), Seldom (63 percent), Never (54 percent)

“The Afterlife Isn’t Going Away,” by Ryan Burge, March 9, 2026, appears on *Graphs about Religion* (substack.com/@ryanburge).

MASS-ATTENDING CATHOLICS WHO'VE MISSED ANNUAL CONFESSION WOULD LIKE TO GO

According to “The Catholic Pulse Report: The Confession Study,” conducted by Vinea Research Group among 1,500 U.S. Catholic adults who attend Mass at least occasionally, “67 percent of respondents who have not been to confession in the past year said they are open to returning, and half of those said they would like to go more often.”

Further, the study “found that only 20 percent of Catholics go to confession regularly (defined as four or more times in the past year), while 12 percent have gone one to three times in the past year.”

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that “individual, integral confession and absolution remain the only ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and the Church, unless physical or moral impossibility excuses from this kind of confession.”

“Study Finds Nearly 70 Percent of Catholics Who Have Not Gone to Confession in the Past Year Want to Go,” by Amira Abuzeid, May 25, 2025, appears on the website of EWTN News (ewtnnews.com).

Another Look at Religiosity among Young Adults

According to Gallup’s annual averages of Americans’ religious views, “The percentage of Americans who say religion is very important in their lives has leveled off below 50 percent in recent years. ... The reading has been gradually declining from 58 percent in 2012 and was as high as 70 percent to 75 percent in the 1950s and 1960s.”

According to the 2025 report, 47 percent of adult Americans consider religion to be very important, 25 percent say fairly important, and 28 percent say not very important. Further, “Except for Catholic and Jewish Americans and Republicans, most groups

have experienced significant declines in the percentages who say religion is very important in their lives.”

At this time of frequent reports of increased religiosity among young adults, the adjacent table on religious attendance seems to indicate otherwise.

Gallup’s “Bottom Line” includes the statement that, “Younger adults are both less likely to identify with a religion and less likely to attend services, reshaping the nation’s religious landscape as they constitute a growing share of the population.”

RELIGIOUS SERVICE ATTENDANCE OF U.S. ADULTS, BY AGE					
Ages	Every Week	Almost Weekly	Monthly	Seldom	Never
18-29	16%	9%	13%	21%	40%
30-49	19%	9%	10%	24%	36%
50-64	21%	10%	11%	28%	28%
65+	27%	10%	9%	27%	24%

“America’s Religious Engagement Holds at Lower Levels,” by Megan Brennan, March 3, 2026, appears on the website of Gallup, Inc. (gallup.com).

RELIGION AS A FACTOR IN MAKING DECISIONS ABOUT RIGHT AND WRONG

Researcher Ryan Burge of Washington University in St. Louis has considered responses to the following related moral questions: “How do people decide what the right thing to do is? What cognitive resources do they tap into to justify their actions—or their inactions? Do non-religious folks have a different framework when it comes to morally complex issues compared to Christians, Jews, or Muslims?”

In answer, he uses a four-question set from the *Pew Religious Landscape Survey* that begins with the following preamble: How important are each of the following to you when making decisions about right and wrong? The items listed are religious teachings and belief, logic and reason, scientific information, and practical experience and common sense. Following are summaries of responses by members of different religious traditions.

- **Proportion by religion who say religion is extremely important when making decisions about right and wrong:** Evangelical (56 percent), Black Protestant (48 percent), Other World Religions (27 percent), Catholic (25 percent), Mainline Protestant (24 percent), Non-Religious (8 percent)
- **Factors Catholics say are extremely important when making decisions about right and wrong:** Experience (53 percent), Logic (51 percent), Science (33 percent), Religion (25 percent)

“The Moral Reasoning Gap in American Christianity,” by Ryan Burge, March 5, 2026, appears in the March 2026 issue of the *Ahead of the Trend Newsletter* of ARDA, the Association of Religion Data Archives (thearda.com).

Most Americans, Including Catholics, Do Not Object to Medical Aid in Dying

According to a survey report from the Pew Research Center, “Illinois and New York recently joined 11 other states and the District of Columbia in allowing people with serious illness to end their lives with a doctor’s help.”

Moreover, “About six in ten Americans say that patients choosing to end their lives with the help of a doctor is either morally acceptable (34 percent) or not a moral issue (29 percent). Another 35 percent say it’s morally wrong, according to the survey, which was conducted in spring 2025.”

Following are the percentages who responded that patients choosing to end their lives with the help of a doctor is morally wrong:

— ***Religiously affiliated (44 percent)***: White evangelical Protestant (60 percent), Black Protestant (52 percent), Protestant overall (48 percent), Catholic (40 percent), White non-evangelical Protestant (25 percent), Jewish (23 percent)

— ***Religiously unaffiliated (12 percent)***: Nothing in particular (17 percent), Agnostic (6 percent), Atheist (5 percent)

“Americans who say religion is very important in their lives (59 percent) are far more likely than those who say religion is personally not too important (14 percent) or not at all important (8 percent) to see physician-assisted death as morally wrong.”

“About 6 in 10 Americans Don’t Have Moral Objections to Medical Aid in Dying,” by Rebecca Leppert, March 23, 2026, appears on the website of Pew Research Center ([pewresearch.org](https://www.pewresearch.org)).

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Trends and Obstacles Affecting Spiritual Care in Catholic Health Settings

In the summer and fall of 2025, CARA conducted a survey of people working in professional spiritual care within Catholic health ministries in the United States. The study, commissioned by the Catholic Health Association (CHA) and the National Association of Catholic Chaplains (NACC), sought to learn from those who lead and serve in spiritual care through Catholic healthcare institutions and Catholic chaplaincy. This follows a similar effort in 2018, when CARA was first asked by CHA and NACC to study healthcare chaplaincy and spiritual care departments.

The survey's 748 participants were employees of a CHA-member ministry or were members of NACC. The survey was designed in three parts. Part one was for professional healthcare chaplains and those who support spiritual care and included questions on demographics, healthcare settings, roles, and responsibilities. Part two was for leaders who oversee spiritual care departments and included questions on organizational structure, staffing, professional standards, training, and documentation. Part three, solely sponsored by NACC, was intended for leaders who oversee spiritual care departments in partnership with their human resources leader; they were asked about comparative compensation and benefits for spiritual care personnel and social workers. The following are excerpts from the survey report.

Who Serves in Spiritual Care Ministry. Overall, 56 percent of respondents are Catholic and 32 percent are Protestant or some other Christian faith. Fifty-three percent are female and 70 percent are non-Hispanic White. Their ages range from 28 to 96, with an average of 57.

Settings of Care. Seventy-three percent serve in a general, community, or regional hospital. Fifty-one percent serve in hospice or palliative care. Other common places are in academic medical centers (43 percent), outpatient clinics or emergency departments (41 percent),

mental or behavioral health settings (38 percent), critical access or rural hospitals (34 percent), and pediatric hospitals (27 percent).

Typical Ministry Activities. In a typical week, respondents were most likely to engage in: Spiritual care assessment, documentation and/or intervention of patient/resident, prayer/ritual (85 percent); staff support, education, orientation (82 percent); end-of-life/bereavement care (73 percent); administrative duties (73 percent); family conferences and support (52 percent); emergency department and trauma center services (50 percent); collaboration with local clergy and community organizations (48 percent); mentorship/student education (44 percent); and palliative care/hospice (43 percent).

Challenges to Chaplaincy. Respondents listed the following as the biggest challenges facing the profession: Funding, compensation, and financial sustainability (32 percent); value, visibility, and administration understanding (21 percent); understanding chaplaincy, role clarity (14 percent); diminishing number of chaplains, recruiting competent staff (14 percent); burnout and workload (10 percent); educational requirements (10 percent); healthcare policy changes (8 percent); and other (15 percent).

Management Responses. The following are what managers say is the biggest challenge facing the profession of chaplaincy in healthcare: Not understanding chaplain ministry (30 percent); budget and finances (21 percent); pay and salaries (18 percent); number of chaplains, staffing (15 percent); requirements for chaplains/positions (14 percent); leadership (13 percent); lack of candidates (5 percent); burnout (3 percent); time (3 percent); lack of priests (3 percent); technology change/developments (2 percent); decline in Catholic/religious values (2 percent); and other (20 percent).

Where Do We Go from Here? A deepened commitment to the essential role of spiritual care in Catholic healthcare remains a key priority for CHA and NACC. To be successful, we must rely on advocacy and

support from all levels of ministry leadership to ensure the provision of spiritual care for patients, families, and colleagues, as well as strategic integration of spiritual care with mission and interdisciplinary clinical teams. Together, we must stay faithful to what Catholic teaching instructs and what clinical evidence supports: Effective holistic healing must embrace a person's physical, psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions.

Additionally, in the coming months, CHA and NACC will more broadly disseminate the current trends and future opportunities revealed by the survey. CHA also plans to publish a white paper on the essentiality of spiritual care in the Catholic health ministry.

"National Survey Highlights Trends and Obstacles to Professional Spiritual Care in Catholic Health Environments" appeared in the publication *Health Progress*, Spring 2026, Volume 107, Number 2. The survey was conducted by Mark M. Gray of CARA, Jill Fisk of CHA, and Erica Cohen Moore of NACC.

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Special Section on Religious Vocations

The Ordination Class of 2026

CARA's annual study of seminarians scheduled for ordination to the priesthood was conducted in collaboration with the Secretariat of Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations during February 12 to March 20, 2026. The heads of U.S. theologates, houses of formation, dioceses, eparchies, and religious institutes identified 428 men scheduled for ordination in 2026: 81 percent to be ordained for a diocese or eparchy and 19 percent for a religious institute.

This year's total of 428 ordinands is an increase of about 6 percent from last year's 405. As seen in the accompanying table, ordinations have been in the 400s since 2018, ranging between 405 and 481 since, averaging 446. This year's survey had a response rate of 78 percent.

U.S. PRIESTLY ORDINATIONS, 2017-2026										
YEAR	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
TOTAL	590	430	481	448	472	419	458	475	405	428
DIOCESAN	77%	76%	75%	83%	75%	75%	81%	83%	80%	81%
RELIGIOUS	23%	24%	25%	17%	25%	25%	19%	17%	20%	19%

Race/Ethnicity and Culture

- Sixty-two percent are White, 17 percent are Hispanic, 11 percent are Asian, 5 percent are Black, and 5 percent identify as other race.
- Thirty-five percent are foreign-born, an increase from last year's 26 percent. Their most common countries of birth are Vietnam (5 percent), Mexico (3 percent), and Colombia (2 percent). On average, they came to the United States 14 years ago, at age 22.

Education and Work Experience

- A higher proportion attended Catholic schools than other Catholics of similar age: elementary school (45 percent), high school (38 percent), and college (34 percent). Eleven percent were home-schooled for an average of nine years.
- Sixty-one percent completed an undergraduate or a graduate degree before the seminary, often in philosophy/theology, engineering, business, and science or math. Twenty-one percent entered with educational debt averaging \$33,200. By ordination, this had decreased by about 24 percent.
- Sixty-four percent had prior full-time work experience, most commonly in Church ministry/parish life (18 percent), education (17 percent), business (15 percent), and sales/customer service (12 percent). Four percent had served in the U.S. Armed Forces.

Family Background

- Ninety-three percent were baptized Catholic as babies. Those who became Catholic later did so on average at age 20.
- Eighty-six percent said both parents were Catholic when they were children. Ninety-seven percent were raised during their childhood by their biological parents.
- Twenty-eight percent had a relative who is a priest or religious.

Vocational Discernment

- Prayer practices prior to seminary: 81 percent participated in Eucharistic Adoration on a regular basis, 79 percent prayed the rosary, 52 percent participated in a prayer/Bible group, and 48 percent engaged in *Lectio Divina*.
- Group activities prior to seminary: 64 percent participated in a parish youth group, 31 percent in Catholic campus ministry, 31 percent in Boy Scouts, 29 percent in Knights of Columbus/Knights of Peter Claver, and 27 percent in a parish young adult group.
- Parish ministries prior to seminary: 79 percent served as altar servers, 49 percent as lectors, 35 percent as extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, and 32 percent as catechists.
- Ninety-two percent were *encouraged* to consider the priesthood by someone in their life, most frequently by a parish priest (70 percent), a friend (49 percent), their mother (46 percent), or a parishioner (44 percent). Forty-one percent were *discouraged* by one or more persons, most often by a friend or classmate, or by their mother, father, or other family member.

Formation

- Sixty-eight percent reported that their pastoral year internship contributed at least “somewhat” to their vocation.

- More than half said the following formation activities contributed to their vocations: clinical pastoral education (52 percent) a priestly fraternity group (51 percent), and pastoral language immersion (45 percent).

The Class of 2026: Survey of Ordinands to the Priesthood, A Report to the Secretariat of Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, by Thu T. Do, LHC, and Thomas P. Gaunt, SJ, April 2026, appears on the USCCB website (usccb.org).

U.S. Permanent Deacons in 2025

Since 2005, CARA has completed annual national surveys of offices of the permanent diaconate in U.S. dioceses and eparchies for the Secretariat of Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. The latest research occurred during February to May 2026, with responses from 143 of the 185 (77 percent) USCCB member dioceses and eparchies. The response rate is higher among dioceses (80 percent) than among eparchies (22 percent). Among the major findings are the following:

Estimated Number of Permanent Deacons in the United States

- The 143 responding dioceses and eparchies reported a total of 17,621 permanent deacons, both active and not active. Extrapolating to include those who did not respond, there were an estimated 21,562 permanent deacons in the United States in 2025.
- The responding dioceses and eparchies reported a total of 12,159 permanent deacons active in ministry. Extrapolating to include those who did not respond, there are an estimated 14,879 deacons active in ministry in the United States. Thus, about 69 percent of all permanent deacons were active in 2025.
- Dioceses with the greatest number of permanent deacons were the Archdiocese of Chicago (812), Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston

(686), Archdiocese of Los Angeles (507), Archdiocese of San Antonio (427), and Archdiocese of New York (362).

- Dioceses with the most favorable deacon-to-parishioner ratios were the Diocese of Lexington (500 to 1), Diocese of Rapid City (552), Diocese of Tulsa (650), Diocese of Duluth (693), and Diocese of Bismarck (713).
- During calendar year 2025, 466 new permanent deacons were ordained, while 494 deacons retired from active ministry and another 390 died. As is the case with U.S. priests, there are too few new permanent deacons being ordained to make up for the numbers who are retiring or dying each year.

Characteristics of Permanent Deacons

- Ninety-two percent of active permanent deacons are married, 4 percent are widowers, 2 percent have never been married, and 1 percent are divorced and not remarried. Ninety-six percent are at least 50 years old: 18 percent are in their 50s, 42 percent are in their 60s, and 36 percent are 70 or older.
- Seventy-one percent of active permanent deacons are White, 23 percent are Hispanic, 4 percent are Asian, and 2 percent are Black. Sixty-eight percent have at least a college degree. Thirteen percent have a graduate degree in a field related to religion or ministry.
- Among permanent deacons compensated for ministry—both full-time and part-time—13 percent are entrusted with the pastoral care of one or more parishes, 19 percent with other parish ministry (e.g., director of religious education or youth ministry), and 14 percent with parish non-ministerial positions (e.g., administration, business, finance).

Active Academic Formation Programs

- Ninety-two percent of dioceses/eparchies have an active ministry formation program for the permanent diaconate. Among those with

no such program in place, none plan to begin a program in the next two years.

- Sixty-five percent of those with active diaconate formation have an in-house diaconate formation program. Forty-three percent of these offer courses online.
- Among those with active diaconate ministry formation, 31 percent offer the program in Spanish.

Post-Ordination Formation

- Eighty-nine percent of responding dioceses/eparchies require post-ordination formation of permanent deacons, a median of 20 hours annually.
- Ninety-seven percent require an annual retreat of deacons, and 95 percent provide other annual gatherings.

A Portrait of the Permanent Diaconate in 2025: A Report to the Secretariat of Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, by Thu T. Do, LHC, and Thomas P. Gaunt, SJ, May 2026, is available on the USCCB website ([usccb.org](https://www.usccb.org)).

The Religious Entrance Class of 2025

For its annual study of vocations to religious life in the United States, CARA requested information from the major superiors of 723 U.S. institutes of women and men religious, to which 548 (76 percent) responded. A total of 141 no longer accept new vocations. Of those that still do, 70 percent had no entrants in 2025, 13 percent had one entrant, and 17 percent had two or more.

The superiors identified 320 new entrants to religious life—137 women and 183 men, of whom 87 percent expect to become priests and 13 percent religious brothers. This is an increase of 11 percent among women, and a decrease of 23 percent among men from the previous

year, for an overall decrease of 12 percent. Sixty-four percent of the identified entrants participated in the CARA survey.

Interestingly, 91 percent of women and 69 percent of men said the members of their institutes wear religious habits.

ENTRANTS IN U.S. RELIGIOUS INSTITUTES, 2018-2025			
Year	Women Sisters and Nuns	Men Priests and Brothers	Total
2018	178	262	440
2019	190	190	380
2020	151	158	309
2021	136	215	351
2022	124	129	253
2023	126	153	279
2024	124	238	362
2025	137	183	320

Characteristics of Responding Religious Entrants

- Their average age is 29, and half are 26 or younger. Sixty-seven percent are White, 14 percent Hispanic, 13 percent Asian, 2 percent Black, and 4 percent are mixed or another race/ethnicity.
- They were born in 15 countries, with 82 percent from the United States. They speak 15 different languages, the most common first languages being English (78 percent) and Spanish (11 percent).
- Seventy-eight percent entered with a bachelor’s degree, 18 percent a master’s degree, and 4 percent a doctoral degree. Similar to the study of ordinands to the priesthood reported elsewhere, many attended Catholic schools: elementary/middle school (47 percent), high school (41 percent), and college/university (49 percent). Sixteen percent were home-schooled for an average of nine years.

- Sixty-nine percent were employed full-time and 18 percent part-time before entering.

Vocational Discernment

- Eighty-nine percent of the entrants have been Catholic since birth, with 80 percent coming from families in which both parents are Catholic. Twenty-nine percent have a relative who is a priest or a religious brother or sister, and 58 percent knew an outside-the-family priest or religious while growing up.
- Most were active in parish life or other religious activities before entering their religious institute. Seventy-three percent participated in retreats, 68 percent in voluntary work in a parish or other setting, and 51 percent in campus ministry during college.
- On average, they were 20 years old when they first considered a vocation to religious life. Nearly all say they were “very much” attracted by a sense of call to religious life (88 percent) and a desire for prayer and spiritual growth (85 percent).

Religious Institute Choice

- Ninety-eight percent were at least “somewhat” attracted by the charism, mission, and spirituality of the institute. Nine in ten are at least “somewhat” attracted by the community life, prayer life, welcome and encouragement by the institute’s members, and the institute’s fidelity to the Church.
- Thirty-five percent report becoming acquainted with their religious institute through the recommendation of a family member, friend, or advisor. Others got acquainted through their own search (27 percent), an institution where members served (25 percent), or the reputation or history of the institute (23 percent).
- Entrants found “very helpful” the live-in experience (86 percent), contact with the vocation director (83 percent), visits to the motherhouse or local community (80 percent), vocation or

discernment retreat (79 percent), and the “Come and See” experience (77 percent).

Experience of Religious Life and Institute

- More than nine in ten say that daily Eucharist (94 percent) and private personal prayer (92 percent) are “very” important to them.
- The following aspects of their community life are “very” important: living with other members (87 percent), praying with other members (83 percent), and sharing meals together (76 percent).
- In written comments, entrants shared a variety of challenges they face in religious life. These include: adapting to the vows—particularly obedience—and the accompanying loss of personal autonomy, separation from family and friends, ongoing adjustments to religious life, inner struggles and personal growth, generational differences, and experiences of burnout.

***Women and Men Entering Religious Life: The Entrance Class of 2025*, by Thu T. Do, LHC, and Thomas P. Gaunt, SJ, March 2026, is available on the CARA website (CARA.georgetown.edu).**

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Annual Catholic School Enrollment Report

The annual report of the National Catholic Educational Association shows that Pre-K to 12 enrollment stands at 1,674,907, with preschool accounting for 10.1 percent of the total. While Catholic school enrollment has declined by 240,912 students (12.6 percent) since the 2015–2016 school year, recent years indicate a stabilizing trend.

Enrollment in 2025–2026 dropped slightly, by 0.5 percent, from the preceding year.

The report's executive summary notes that, "In 2025, 16 states expanded their parental choice programs, increasing opportunities for families to choose Catholic schools. These programs are especially impactful in the following states: Ohio, Florida, Oklahoma, Iowa, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Arizona, where more than half of the Catholic school students benefit from their implementation." Other report highlights follow.

Enrollment

- Total Catholic school student enrollment is 1,674,907: 1,155,344 in elementary/middle schools and 519,563 in secondary schools.
- Student diversity: 35.1 percent are racial minorities, including 17.1 percent Hispanic and 3.9 percent reported as unknown.
- Non-Catholic enrollment is 372,244, or 22.2 percent of total enrollment.

Schools

- There are 5,829 Catholic schools: 4,644 elementary, 1,185 secondary.
- During the past year, 13 new schools opened, while 62 consolidated or closed.
- 2,189 schools have a waiting list for admission.
- Coeducational schools make up 98.6 percent of elementary and 73.9 percent of secondary schools. At the secondary level, 11.4 percent are male only and 14.7 percent are female only.

Professional Staff

- Full-time equivalent professional staff numbered 151,514. Non-Catholics account for 16.5 percent of faculty members.

- Among faculty, 92.8 percent were laity (70.7 percent lay women, 22.1 percent lay men), 2.5 percent were religious/clergy (1.4 percent sisters, 0.4 percent brothers, 0.6 percent clergy), and 4.7 percent unknown.
- The student/teacher ratio is 11.1 to 1.

Other Useful School Comparisons

- **Percentage of high school graduation rates by school types:** Catholic (98.6 percent), other religious (96.8 percent), non-sectarian (91.2 percent), public (87.0 percent with actual high school diplomas)
- **High school graduates who attend 4-year colleges:** Catholic (83.7 percent), other religious (60.0 percent), non-sectarian (56.5 percent), public (45.0 percent)

United States Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools 2025–2026: The Annual Statistical Report on Schools, Enrollment, and Staffing, was published in 2026 by the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA.org).

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Assessing Diocesan Child Protection Programs

During the first meeting of the Synod on Synodality, the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors issued a “call to action” for the Roman Catholic Church to increase its commitment and resources for safeguarding children: “We are long overdue in fixing the flaws in procedures that leave victims wounded.”

In 2022, as an aid to dioceses in achieving the Vatican’s and USCCB’s standards in the continuing effort to protect children and youth against clergy sexual abuse, the lay Catholic organization Voice of the Faithful (VOTF) introduced a new program called Measuring Abuse Prevention

and Safe Environment Programs as Reported Online in Diocesan Policies and Practices.

During June to August 2025, VOTF-sponsored researchers examined the websites of all 177 U.S. dioceses and scored each on its content concerning protection of children, based on 10 categories: policy, codes of conduct, reporting of abuse, background checks, prevention education and training, contact information, audit reporting, diocesan review boards, list of accused clergy, and victim assistance.

Out of a possible 100 points, the average score was 66.26, a disappointing decline from the 70.50 of the last report. The highest scores were assigned to Richmond, VA (92.5), Ogdensburg, NY (91.0), Salina, KS (89.0), Grand Island, NE (88.5), Winona-Rochester, MN (88.0), and Wheeling-Charleston, WV (87.5). At the other end were St. Thomas, USVI (35.0), San Antonio, TX (38.0), Pueblo, CO (40.0), Military Services USA (42.0), Las Vegas, NV (43.5), and Laredo, TX (44.0).

2025 Report: Measuring Abuse Prevention and Safe Environment Programs as Reported Online in Diocesan Policies and Practices, published in 2026 by Voice of the Faithful, is available on their website (votf.org).

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Young Men Now Outpace Young Women on Measures of Religiosity

A report on the religiosity of Americans aged 18 to 29 indicates that young men now bypass young women in measures of the importance of religion, religious affiliation, and religious attendance. The following comparisons are from a report based on biennial aggregates of Gallup's religion data since 2000.

Importance of Religiosity. From 2000 to 2021, young women aged 18 to 29 were significantly more attached to religion than young men, with 52

percent saying religion was “very important” in their lives versus 43 percent for young men. In the 2024–2025 study, the percentages were young men at 42 percent and young women at 29 percent.

Religious Identity. The proportion of young men expressing religious identity (63 percent in 2024–2025) has been rising since 2016–2017, while the proportion of young women doing so has been decreasing, falling six points to 60 percent today.

Religious Attendance. Gallup’s key behavioral measure of religiosity—self-reported attendance at a church or other house of worship—shows changes among young men that mirror the patterns seen for the importance of religion. The percentage of young men reporting monthly or more frequent attendance at religious services rose seven points between 2022–2023 and 2024–2025, reaching 40 percent. Young women’s attendance has also increased modestly since 2022–2023, rising three points to 39 percent—far below levels in the early 2000s.

Notably, the changing gender religiosity trends show significant differences by political identification. Since 2022–2023, religious attendance has risen seven points among young Republican men, eight points among young Republican women, three points among young Democratic men, and was virtually unchanged among young Democratic women. In considering these differences, it is useful to note that in 2024–2025, 48 percent of young men identified as or leaned Republican, compared with 41 percent who identified as or leaned Democratic. By contrast, only 27 percent of young women identified as or leaned Republican, while 60 percent identified as or leaned Democratic.

“Rise in Young Men’s Religiosity Realignment Gender Gaps,” by Frank Newport and Lydia Saad, April 16, 2026, appears on the website of Gallup, Inc. ([gallup.com](https://www.gallup.com)).

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Ongoing Research

CARA Presentations in India, Tanzania, and the Vatican ...

This spring, CARA researchers gave presentations around the world. On May 7, in Bangalore, India, Sister Thu Do presented “Rising South, Declining North: A Social Movement Analysis of Catholic Sisters” at the symposium Pilgrimage of Hope: Consecrated, Living Flames of God’s Love sponsored by the Conference of Religious Women–India. From June 10 to 12, Dr. Jon Wiggins represented CARA at the Hilton Foundation Convening of Catholic Sisters Partners in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, before traveling to the Vatican to present on “Challenges in Collecting Information about Allegations of Abuse from Dioceses, Eparchies, and Communities of Religious Institutes of Men” on June 18.

Assisting Sisters in South America ...

CARA is assisting the Conferences of Sisters in Brazil and Argentina in surveying the sisters of each country as to their challenges and hopes. Sister Thu Do has assisted with similar efforts in the Philippines and Vietnam. For more information, contact Sr. Thu Do at ttd9@georgetown.edu.

Summer Intern at CARA ...

This summer, CARA once again has a summer intern with us. Craig Bowman, a rising junior at Georgetown University originally from Beaufort, South Carolina, joins the CARA research team for June and July to assist with projects and develop applied research skills.

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The CARA Report



Editor Julie Bourbon
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