

CARA sociologists take guesswork out of understanding the Catholic world

Tom Roberts | Jun. 22, 2015
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There's a place where you can get your generational bias adjusted, find your spot along the digital divide and pick up an antidote to all those downer stories about the Catholic church falling apart in a new age of diminishment.

It goes by the somewhat unwieldy name Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, better known as CARA, pronounced as it's spelled. Affiliated with Georgetown University, the independent, nonprofit research center is tucked away in a suite of offices on the fourth floor of a converted apartment building on Wisconsin Avenue in Northwest Washington, D.C.

The small staff produces what is perhaps the ecclesial equivalent to the kind of information that insider traders might covet. While churches, like markets, can run wild with rumors and hunches, CARA was founded 50 years ago to take some of the guesswork out of understanding what's going on and where things are headed in the Catholic world.

Sociology wasn't always viewed kindly when applied to church matters. Cardinal Roger Mahony (now retired) of Los Angeles once assessed as "nonsense" research done in the early 1990s by Richard Schoenherr of the University of Wisconsin predicting an impending priest shortage. Mahony said the work did the church a "disservice and "presumes that the only factors at work are sociology and statistical research. ... We live by God's grace, and our future is shaped by God's design for his church -- not by sociologists." The predictions of the priest shortage, by the way, were remarkably accurate and decades ahead of the reality.

Not all church leaders feel that way, of course, and it was a prominent archbishop, Boston Cardinal Richard Cushing, who gathered other bishops and superiors of religious communities and donated \$50,000 to start CARA.

Today, the effort survives on research fees and donations. It is independent from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Cushing's successor in Boston, Cardinal Sean O'Malley, delivered an address at a celebration of CARA's 50th anniversary last year.

If the name is a bit unwieldy, it was a product of its time and states one of the central intents of the project.

"The idea from the very beginning is that it would be applied research, not academic research. It's not all in your head. This is research to help the church, the ministry of the church," said Mary Gautier, 62. The senior member of the group, Gautier has been with the center since 1998 and edits the CARA Report.

NCR recently sat down for a conversation at CARA headquarters with its four full-time researchers -- Gautier, senior research associate; Mark Gray, 44, who joined the center in 2002 and who writes its increasingly influential blog, *1964* (the year CARA was founded); Jonathon Wiggins, 50, director of CARA parish surveys;

Jonathon Holland, 26, research assistant -- and Jesuit Fr. Thomas Gaunt, 61, executive director.

Sociologists are hardly designing the church. At their best, they're able to describe things as they are (or as they may be) by assembling data.

Even the most convincing data can be upsetting when it gets in the way of a favorite narrative. Gaunt cautions that CARA's inquiries can lead to rather pedestrian conclusions. For instance, he said, the center began to notice a drop in baptisms. The major theories being advanced in some quarters to explain the phenomenon blamed secularization and an anti-religious U.S. culture.

What didn't fit, however, was CARA's understanding that the decline was occurring in areas with lots of new Catholics. "This is in Dallas or Houston or Phoenix," said Gaunt. "There are no parishes you can walk to. They all drive. And they're overwhelmed. And this is where we're beginning to find the drop in the number of baptisms. The data would suggest it's not secularization -- it's parking. If you're there with a baby, and you're going to have to show up an hour early to try to get a parking spot and get in," he said, that could cut into attendance and those early sacraments.

"It's not some big sociological issue, but rather a very practical matter that every bishop and every pastor has it within his power to address," said Gaunt.

Not all misconceptions yield to such clear answers. The basis for the put-up-a-parking-lot solution -- increasing numbers of Catholics in areas that historically have not been the traditional centers of Catholicism in the United States -- also is the basis of other misconceptions about the nature of the church in this country and where it is headed.

It's easy to make Gray roll his eyes and sigh in a here-we-go-again expression. Just mention the 2008 report by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life titled "Faith in Flux: Changes in Religious Affiliation in the U.S." The bottom line in that report was unremittingly gloomy -- one in 10 U.S. adults is a former Catholic, meaning, at the time, that about 22.8 million people fit the category.

The popular way to characterize the number (and we did it here at *NCR*) was to say that if former Catholics were a denomination, it would be the second-largest in the country behind Catholics (nearly 70 million at the time and heading toward 80 million today) and well ahead of the next denomination, Southern Baptists (16.2 million).

All of that is correct to a certain extent. It's what's missing, Gray argues, that skews the picture. What he points out as a corrective is that the percentage of those raised Catholic who eventually leave the faith -- 32 percent -- is actually a far lower percentage than that of mainline Protestant denominations.

For instance, take the percentage of those who have been raised in and then left other denominations: Presbyterians, 59 percent; Anglican/Episcopal church, 56 percent; Methodists, 54 percent; Lutherans, 42 percent; and Baptists, 39 percent. The actual Catholic number (not the percentage) stands out, he said, because the Catholic church is so much larger than the rest.

The perception of a shrinking church is reinforced by the endless string of stories over the past two decades about the mergers and closings of Catholic churches, schools and other institutions across the Northeast and Upper Midwest. The structures that once provided U.S. Catholicism with its bricks-and-mortar identity were being repurposed or sold to nondenominational evangelical congregations, a move unthinkable half a century ago when those same locations were accommodating waves of European immigration. Convents were bulging with young nuns. Rectories were full of young priests who ran every aspect of parish life.

The iconographic structures that once provided U.S. Catholicism with its image and character are now often shells of their former selves. The huge number of priests and nuns that staffed the church's infrastructure for a 20-year period or so from the 1940s to the mid-1960s, it turns out was a demographic blip. Such numbers didn't exist before that period and, says the CARA data, all indications are that they are unlikely to occur in the future.

The number of priests ordained per year actually has varied little during the past 30 years. In 2014, the number stood at 494. Both Gautier and Gray said that to stay even with the current number of priests, given the aging priest population and, consequently, the number who will be dying and retiring in the near future, would require 700 to 800 ordinations a year. Returning to 1965 levels, they said, would require well over 1,000 per year for the foreseeable future.

Internal migration

Gaunt described one characteristic of the current situation as "the massive migration move," not an "in-migration" of people from other countries, though that also is happening, but more "an internal migration." Nearly a majority of the Catholic population resided in the Northeast 50 to 60 years ago, he said, but today the same area holds only a quarter of the Catholic population.

"The Catholics moved, but they didn't bring their institutions with them," said Gautier. Left behind were all the institutional structures, especially the parishes that once were home for millions of immigrants for Europe.

"The schools, the Catholic colleges, the seminaries, are still concentrated in the Northeast and the Midwest," she said. "So the experience of the church in the Northeast and the Upper Midwest is one of a church in decline. And that's a public perception that's very, very common, and that's one of the things we try to point out."

The vibrant, new expressions of church can't be seen from an office tower in Manhattan or Boston, Philadelphia or Cleveland. Gaunt, who served as a pastor in Winston-Salem, N.C., and as director of planning and research for the Charlotte diocese, said the situation is quite different in the major cities of the South and West.

Atlanta is adding a new parish a year and can't build churches fast enough, he said. According to archdiocesan figures, 50,000 new Catholics have been added every year for 10 years. "Atlanta added half a million Catholics over a decade." Yet for the media, he said, "closing a church with a hundred members becomes the story instead of the church that's opening for thousands."

While no national strategy exists for determining what the church of the future might look like, changes have been occurring of necessity for decades, and cumulatively they mark quite a different community from that of our forebears. A few particulars:

? The church is changing color. Where once the dominant culture was white and European, heavy on Irish ecclesiology and practice, today the majority of Catholic families with minor children are Hispanic, with large numbers from Mexico and Central America.

"I don't think that registers in any way for the larger population," said Gaunt. "It may register if you're in Texas or California or Georgia, but it's not registering in Philadelphia and New York or Chicago. A majority of the Catholic families are Hispanic."

Parishes are also experiencing infusions of people from West Africa, the Caribbean, areas of Asia and large numbers from India.

? The median age of people in the pews is now the 40s, said Gray, another reality that might escape churchgoers

in the Northeast who often find themselves amid aging congregations that show little evidence of younger members.

? The total number of priests in the United States has dropped from a high of 58,632 in 1965 to 38,275 in 2014. The number of diocesan priests over that same period has shrunk from 35,952 to 26,275. Because of illness and retirement, of that number, fewer than 20,000 are available for regular service. Of that last figure, more than 6,000 are from other countries, most of those places with a far lower priest-to-people ratio than in the United States. Further, many of them are here temporarily.

What once was considered a priest shortage is now the norm. The question remains, however, what model of church will replace the one that was so dependent on an abundance of priests.

? The answer to that question may again be the result of necessity rather than planning. As the number of priests continues to decline, the size of new church buildings has continued to increase, so that now some dioceses are building the Catholic versions of Protestant megachurches.

According to CARA data (there's a button on CARA's Web site titled "Frequently Requested Church Statistics" that opens an invaluable lode of information), the high point for the number of parishes was in 1990 when 19,620 parishes served a population of approximately 62.4 million Catholics. Today, the number of parishes is 17,483, slightly less than the number in 1965, when the Catholic population was 48.5 million. The U.S. Catholic population today is about 80 million.

"The parishes that we have now are larger," said Gautier. "They seat more, and they sometimes have 3,500 members."

? Just as parishes have grown larger to accommodate the smaller clergy force, so have the groups of lay ministers and permanent deacons. In 1965, neither of those categories existed.

The first listing of permanent deacons on the CARA chart occurs in 1975 (the chart is done in five-year intervals except for the current year). In 2014, there were 17,464 permanent deacons. The category is open to men only, many of whom are married, ordained to service in the church, though that service varies widely from parish to parish and diocese to diocese.

The first cataloguing of lay ecclesial ministers (including vowed religious like nuns and brothers) occurred in 1990, when there were 21,569. Today there are nearly twice as many: 39,651 paid lay ministers working in parishes and at the diocesan level. Of those, 21,424 are nonvowed laypeople. In 2014, nearly 23,000 potential ministerial candidates were enrolled in lay ecclesial ministry formation programs.

In all of the data, a new and differently shaped church emerges and, perforce, one with a still-changing ecclesiology.

Gaunt expresses dismay that anyone thinks any of this is new. "I was ordained in '81, 34 years ago. All of these realities were there then. This simply is not new. ... How many decades have to go by before we accept this reality?"

New issues

Holland would agree in some ways. In his campus parish at the University of Kentucky, there were tensions between conservatives and liberals over some practices. None of the millennials understood what was going on, he said, until "a seminarian came in and sat down with us and he explained Vatican II, everything that had happened during those years, why it happened and people's different reactions to the council. And we said, 'Oh

my gosh, we get it now. Everything that's happening in this parish, we understand. We had no clue.' "

While the baggage that still causes tension in a liberal-conservative divide may eventually leave the stage as the Vatican II generation dies off, the changes in the church are hardly settled.

New issues include debt (one that Holland said affects significant numbers in his age group) and time. "We put up all these barriers to do anything in the church," said Gray. He thinks the low convert rate in the church in the United States has at least something to do with the RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) process.

"It is a huge commitment, it takes a lot of time, it takes a lot of effort," he said. "The same thing goes with sacraments. If I have to jump through five hoops to get my child baptized and I have to be here on this date and this date only, and you can't come on Wednesday. Oh, well, those are the kinds of things that dissuade people."

Those forms may have worked in the old tightly knit neighborhood parish. But today, when someone has to drive and may be working several jobs to make ends meet, he thinks the church might do well to think of "a more 21st-century way of doing sacramental preparation."

If someone is on the younger side of the digital divide, they may not "take the time to do the things the previous generations did, and they're not going to do it in the way the previous generations did." The same thinking goes for marriage preparation and just generally educating and engaging younger Catholics.

Maybe some bishop will want to study that problem in more depth before he gets too upset about why more young Catholics aren't showing up for things. He could call (or email or text) the crew at CARA.

"Who else has the luxury of having 80 million of anything to study?" said Gautier. "I mean it's never a dull moment. It's just a great church."

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