

Franciscan University Presents
“Renewal: The Catholic Church Today”
With guest, Dr. Anne Hendershott

Traditional Catholicism Is Winning

There were 467 new priestly ordinations in the U.S. last year, and Boston’s seminary had to turn away applicants.

By ANNE HENDERSHOTT AND CHRISTOPHER WHITE

In his Holy Thursday homily at St. Peter's Basilica on April 5, Pope Benedict XVI denounced calls from some Catholics for optional celibacy among priests and for women's ordination. The pope said that "true renewal" comes only through the "joy of faith" and "radicalism of obedience."

And renewal is coming. After the 2002 scandal about sexual abuse by clergy, progressive Catholics were predicting the end of the celibate male priesthood in books like "Full Pews and Empty Altars" and "The Death of Priesthood." Yet today the number of priestly ordinations is steadily increasing.

A new seminary is to be built near Charlotte, N.C., and the archdiocese of Washington, D.C., has expanded its facilities to accommodate the surge in priestly candidates. Boston's Cardinal Sean Patrick O'Malley recently told the National Catholic Register that when he arrived in 2003 to lead that archdiocese he was advised to close the seminary. Now there are 70 men in Boston studying to be priests, and the seminary has had to turn away candidates for lack of space.

According to the Vatican's Central Office of Church Statistics, there were more than 5,000 more Catholic priests world-wide in 2009 than there were in 1999. This is welcome news for a growing Catholic population that has suffered through a real shortage of priests.

The situation in the U.S. is still tenuous. The number of American Catholics has grown to 77.7 million, up from 50 million in 1980. But the priest-to-parishioner ratio has changed for the worse. In 1965, there was one priest for every 780 American parishioners. By 1985, there was one priest for every 900 Catholics, and by 2011 there was one for every 2,000. In dioceses where there are few ordinations, such as New York's Rochester and Albany, people know this shortage well.

Still, the future is encouraging. There were 467 new priestly ordinations in the U.S. last year, according to a survey by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, up from 442 a decade ago.

While some of the highest numbers of new priests are in the Catholic-majority cities of Newark, N.J., and Philadelphia, ordinations in Washington, D.C. (18 last year) and Chicago (26) also are booming. The biggest gains are not only in traditional Catholic strongholds. In Lincoln, Neb., Catholics constitute only 16% of the population yet have some of the strongest numbers of ordinations. In 2011, there were 10 men ordained as priests in Lincoln.

What explains the trend? Nearly 20 years ago, Archbishop Elden Curtiss, then leader of the Omaha, Neb., diocese, suggested that when dioceses are unambiguous and allow a minimum of dissent about the male, celibate priesthood, more candidates answer the call to the priesthood. Our preliminary research on the correlates of priestly ordinations reveals that the dioceses with the largest numbers of new priests are led by courageous bishops with faithful and inspirational vocations offices.

Leadership and adherence to church doctrine certainly distinguish the bishop of Lincoln, the Most Rev. Fabian Bruskewitz. He made national news in 1996 when he stated that members of dissident Catholic groups including Call to Action and Catholics for Choice had automatically excommunicated themselves from the church.

Cardinal Francis George, the longtime leader of the Chicago archdiocese, once gave a homily that startled the faithful by pronouncing liberal Catholicism "an exhausted project . . . parasitical on a substance that no longer exists." Declaring that Catholics are at a "turning point" in the life of the church in this country, the cardinal concluded that the bishops must stand as a "reality check for the apostolic faith."

Such forthright defense of the faith and doctrine stands in clear contrast to the emphasis of an earlier generation of Catholic theologians and historians. Many boomer priests and scholars were shaped by what they believed was an "unfulfilled promise" of Vatican II to embrace modernity. Claiming that the only salvation for the church would be to ordain women, remove the celibacy requirement and empower the laity, theologians such as Paul Lakeland, a Fairfield University professor and former Jesuit priest, have demanded that much of the teaching authority of the bishops and priests be transferred to the laity.

This aging generation of progressives continues to lobby church leaders to change Catholic teachings on reproductive rights, same-sex marriage and women's ordination. But it is being replaced by younger men and women who are attracted to the church because of the very timelessness of its teachings.

They are attracted to the philosophy, the art, the literature and the theology that make Catholicism countercultural. They are drawn to the beauty of the liturgy and the church's commitment to the dignity of the individual. They want to be contributors to that commitment—alongside faithful and courageous bishops who ask them to make sacrifices. It is time for Catholics to celebrate their arrival.

Ms. Hendershott is a distinguished visiting professor at the King's College in New York. Mr. White is the international director of operations with the World Youth Alliance. They are the co-authors of the forthcoming "Beyond the Catholic Culture Wars" (Encounter Books).

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**Titles Mentioned on *Franciscan University Presents*
“Renewal: The Catholic Church Today”
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***Renewal: How a New Generation of Faithful Priests and Bishops Are Revitalizing the Catholic Church* by Anne Hendershott/Christopher White. Encounter Books.**

***Evangelical Catholicism: Deep Reform in the 21st Century Church* by George Weigel. Basic Books.**

***The Joy of Priesthood* by Msgr. Stephen Rossetti. Ave Maria Press.**

***Still Point: Loss, Longing, and Our Search for God ** by Dr. Regis Martin. Ave Maria Press.**

***Consuming the Word: The New Testament and The Eucharist in the Early Church ** by Dr. Scott Hahn. Image Publishing.**

***FOCUS: Fellowship of Catholic University Students.* www.focus.org**

***Eternal Word Television Network:* EWTN.com**

***National Catholic Register Newspaper:* www.NCRegister.com**

Fr. Robert Barron: WordonFire.org

Magnificat.com

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