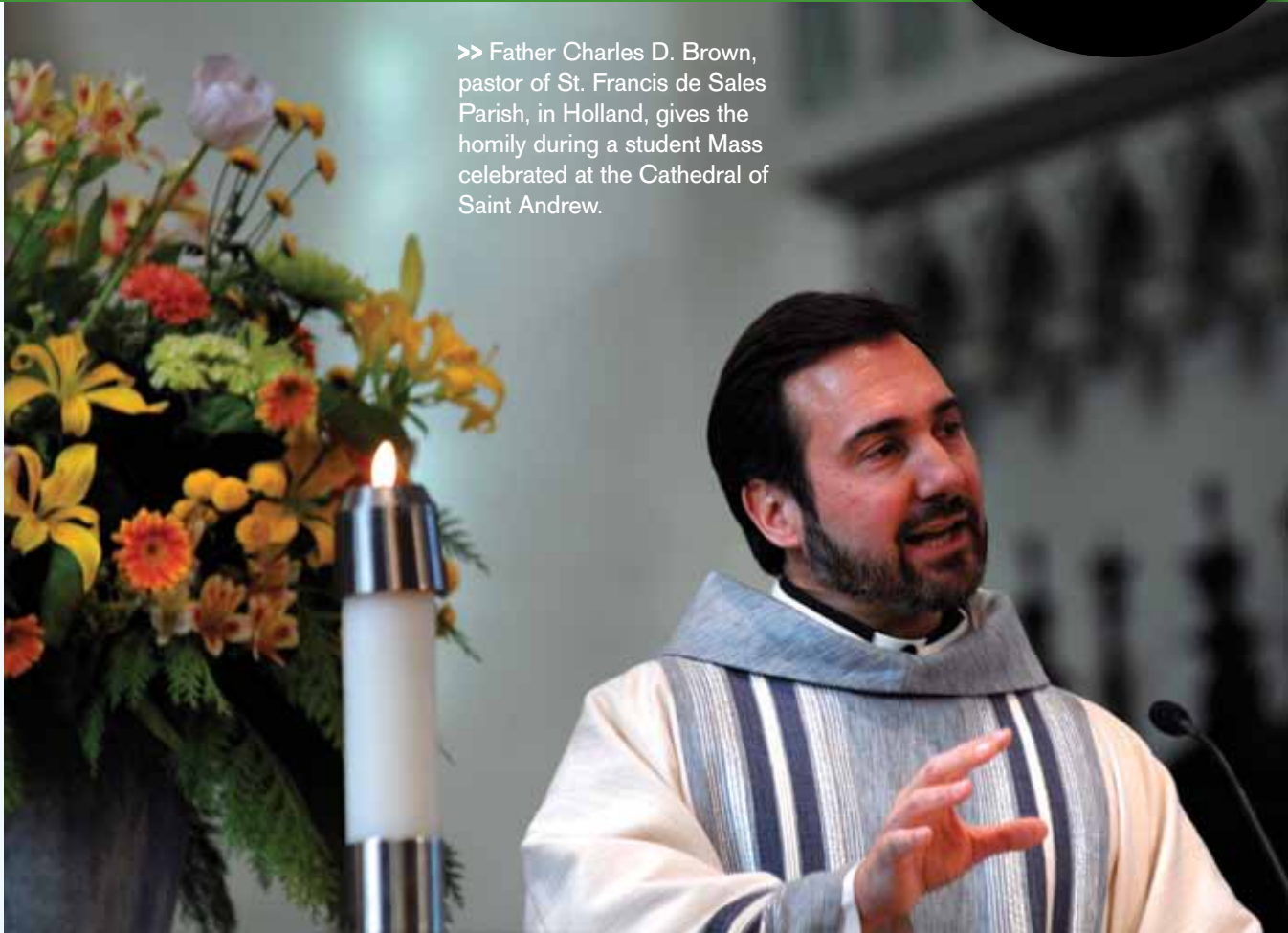


# What's happening with priestly vocations?

By Doug Culp



» Father Charles D. Brown, pastor of St. Francis de Sales Parish, in Holland, gives the homily during a student Mass celebrated at the Cathedral of Saint Andrew.

**Q:** Since 1965, what has been the trend in the number of vocations to the priesthood in the United States?

**A:** According to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., there were about 36,000 diocesan priests and 22,700 religious priests in the 195 dioceses or eparchies that belonged to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1965. By 2008, the number of diocesan priests had declined to approximately 27,600, while religious priests were down to just under 13,000.

The number of priestly ordinations also declined from 994 in 1965 to 480 in 2008 and the total number of graduate-level seminarians fell from about 8,300 in 1965 to just below 3,300 in 2008. Not surprisingly, the number of parishes without a resident priest/pastor increased from 549 in 1965 to 3,141 in 2008.

**Q:** What has been the trend across the globe?

**A:** CARA states that, worldwide, there were 270,924 diocesan priests and 148,804 religious priests in 1970. By 2005, these numbers had declined slightly to 269,762 diocesan priests and 136,649 religious priests. At the same time, the number of priestly ordinations increased from just above 4,600 in 1970 to more than 6,600 in 2005, as did the number of graduate-level seminarians (from 33,731 in 1980 to 58,538 in 2005).

**Q:** Do these trends amount to a crisis in vocations?

**A:** The drastic decline in the numbers of priests and seminarians in the United States since 1965

certainly suggests that there is cause for great concern. Compounding this decline is the fact that the Catholic population in the U.S. has been increasing. CARA indicates the Catholic population in 1965 was 45.6 million. In 2008, this number had increased to 64.1 million.

Although the overall number of priests has remained somewhat stable globally, the number of parishes without a resident priest/pastor grew from 39,431 in 1970 to 52,509 in 2005. The Catholic population worldwide increased from 653.6 million in 1970 to 1.115 billion in 2005.

In short, the data paint a grim picture of an expanding Catholic Church with an ever-increasing shortage of priests. It is even more troubling when one considers that the source and summit of the Catholic life is the Eucharist, and it is only the priest who can consecrate the bread and wine.

**Q:** Are there any positive developments in the area of vocations?

**A:** Yes. For example, CARA indicates the number of vocations to the permanent diaconate in the United States has dramatically increased, from 898 in 1975 to 15,893 in 2008. Globally, the number of permanent deacons increased from just 309 in 1970 to 33,391 in 2005. While this increase can be attributed in part to the response of the church in renewing the role of the diaconate in the face of the shortage of priests, it does offer hopeful signs that the spirit of vocations to the ordained life is alive.

In addition, the Catholic Religious Vocation Network reported a 62 percent jump in inquiries into Catholic religious life and a 32 percent increase in the number of people in the first stages of formation in 2008 in the Vision VocationMatch.com Second Annual Survey on Trends in Religious Vocation – a positive trend detected in the 2007 survey. The majority of those considering religious life were under 30 years of age and quite serious about their life choice. About one in five plan on entering a religious community in the next year, while another 64 percent are “seriously considering it.”

In a *Catholic World Report* special report on priestly vocations in December 2007, Jeff Ziegler points to the worldwide growth in the number of seminarians, especially during the pontificate of John Paul II, and explores what several U.S. dioceses that have the highest ratio of diocesan seminarians to Catholics in 2006 are doing amid a declining seminary population. The hope is to glean best practices that can then be employed nationwide to increase the number of vocations.

The fact that many new U.S. priests are in their 30s may be a reason for optimism. According to a report from Catholic News Service and the USCCB, the average age for the class of 2008 was 36 for diocesan priests and 39 for religious priests. Citing another CARA survey, the report indicated that approximately 30 percent of the new priests were between 25 and 29 years of age and 39 percent were in their 30s. The ordination class of 2008 also was made up of about 33 percent foreign-born ordinands, an indication that the U.S. Catholic Church may be benefiting from the worldwide increase in the number of seminarians.



**Miter:**

**The miter is the tall peaked hat that bishops wear.** Its two shield-shaped halves are said to represent the Old and New Testaments. Two strips of fabric called lappets hang down the back. Originally, the lappets could be tied around the chin to prevent the miter from falling off while the bishop was on horseback. The miter is laid aside while the bishop prays. Underneath the miter, the bishop wears a zucchetto, a skullcap which was originally devised to keep hair oil off the miter.

**How has Hollywood depicted Catholic priests?**

>> We often hear complaints about how priests and the church are portrayed in the movies. Have things really changed? Take a look back at some priestly depictions from the 1930s and '40s – an era some call the ‘golden age’ of filmed priest-heroes.



*Angels with Dirty Faces*

**In 1938's *Angels with Dirty Faces*, we meet two tough guys who grew up in a tough neighborhood – Hell's Kitchen in New York City.** Jimmy Cagney's character, Rocky Sullivan, becomes a top-notch criminal. Jerry Connolly, played by Pat O'Brien, becomes a Catholic priest who returns to the old neighborhood to help kids who are at risk of ending up in reform school themselves. Rocky and Jerry are still friends, but the plot hinges on their opposing views – Rocky has become the idol of neighborhood gangster wannabes. As was typical of movies in the 30s featuring priests, good wins in the end.