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Religious Life

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The decrease in the number of religious brothers and of women in religious orders is "worrying," according to the Vatican statistics office.

While the number of religious brothers in Africa and Asia continues to increase, the number of religious brothers worldwide experienced an 8% drop between 2013 and 2018, while the number of women religious fell 7.5% globally in the same period, the Vatican Central Office for Church Statistics reported.

However, the number of baptized Catholics increased by 6% between 2013 and 2018, reaching 1.33 billion or almost 18% of the global population, the statistics office reported March 25.

The figures are presented in the "Annuario Pontificio 2020," the Vatican yearbook, and will appear in the Statistical Yearbook of the Church, which gives detailed figures on the church's workforce, sacramental life, dioceses and parishes. The statistics are based on figures valid as of Dec. 31, 2018.

The region with the highest proportion of Catholics, the yearbook reported, is in North and South America with "63.7 Catholics per 100 inhabitants," followed by Europe with 39.7 Catholics, Oceania with 26.3 and Africa with 19.4 Catholics for every 100 inhabitants.

Asia, the report noted, has the lowest percentage of Catholics in the general population, making up 3.3 Catholics for every 100 inhabitants due to "the great spread of non-Christian denominations in the continent."

The number of bishops of the world continued to increase in 2018, reaching 5,337 worldwide compared to 5,173 in 2013.

The report also stated that while the total number of priests — diocesan and religious order — around the world increased slightly — by 0.3% in the 2013-2018 period — the numbers "appear rather disappointing overall."

Europe, it said, showed a decrease of more than 7% in 2018 alone, while the decline in Oceania was a little over 1%. The decline in both continents account for the low numbers worldwide.

However, the 14.3% increase of priests in Africa and 11% in Asia over 2013-2018 "is quite comforting," while numbers in North and South America "remain stationary," the report said.

The yearbook also said that the number of permanent deacons is "rapidly evolving," noting a significant increase from 43,195 in 2013 to 47,504 in 2018.

The number of candidates for the priesthood — both in diocesan seminarians and in religious orders — who had reached the level of philosophy and theology studies showed "a slow and gradual" downturn.

The number of priesthood candidates fell to 115,880 men at the end of 2018 compared to 118,251 men at the end of 2013, with Europe as well as North and South America accounting for the largest reduction in numbers.

Nevertheless, the report stated, "Africa, with a positive variation of 15.6%, confirms that it is the geographical area with the greatest potential to cover the needs of pastoral services."

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