

Church statistics show increase in Catholics, priests, seminarians

VATICAN CITY - The latest Vatican statistics show a slight increase in Catholics as a percentage of the world's population, and a slow but steady rise in the number of priests and seminarians worldwide.

The statistics, from the end of 2008, were presented along with the new Vatican yearbook Feb. 20.

The Vatican said the number of Catholics reached 1.166 billion, an increase of 19 million, or 1.7 percent, from the end of 2007. During the same period, Catholics as a percentage of the global population grew from 17.33 percent to 17.4 percent, it said.

The number of priests stood at 409,166, an increase of 1,142 from the end of 2007. Since the year 2000, the Vatican said, the number of priests has increased by nearly 4,000, or about 1 percent.

Looking at the way priests are distributed around the world, it said: 47.1 percent were in Europe, 30 percent in the Americas, 13.2 percent in Asia, 8.7 percent in Africa and 1.2 percent in Oceania.

The number of seminarians around the world rose from 115,919 at the end of 2007 to 117,024 at the end of 2008, an increase of more than 1 percent, it said.

The increase in seminarians varied geographically: Africa showed an increase of 3.6 percent, Asia an increase of 4.4 percent, and Oceania an increase of 6.5 percent, while Europe had a decrease of 4.3 percent and the Americas remained about the same.

The statistics showed that professed religious women remain the single largest category of pastoral workers, but that overall their numbers continue to decline. From 2000 to the end of 2008, the Vatican said, the number of women religious went from 801,185 to 739,067, a drop of 7.8 percent.

Regarding geographic distribution, it said the largest numbers of women religious are still found in Europe (40.9 percent of the total) and the Americas (27.5 percent of the total); both areas have shown a significant decline in numbers since 2000, however. During the same period, the number of women religious in Africa has increased by 21.2 percent, and in Asia by 16.4 percent, it said.