

Vatican statistics show overall increase in number of priests

VATICAN CITY - The number of Catholic priests in the world has increased consistently over the past decade and the "relative superabundance" of priests in Europe and North America has begun to attenuate, the Vatican said.

The "relative superabundance" refers to the percentage of the world's priests who live in Europe and North America compared to the percentage of the world's Catholics who live there.

Anticipating some of the figures that would be released in the Statistical Yearbook of the Church later in February, the Vatican newspaper said that in 1999, just more than 15 percent of the world's priests lived and ministered in Central and South America while 42.4 percent of the world's Catholics lived there. At the end of 2009, the percentage had changed slightly: Latin America had 17.3 percent of the priests and 42.2 percent of the world's Catholics.

L'Osservatore Romano, the Vatican newspaper, published its article Feb. 10 with a small selection of statistics from the yearbook reporting worldwide church figures as of Dec. 31, 2009.

The newspaper article focused on the statistics' demonstration of 10 years of steady growth in the number of Catholic priests in the world. A more complete set of statistics was expected to be released when the Vatican had finished printing the yearbook.

The Vatican reported an increase of 809 priests during the 2009 calendar year and an increase of close to 5,600 priests between 1999 and 2009, the newspaper said.

The overall increase came despite the continuing steep decline in the number of religious-order priests, it reported.

Of the 410,593 priests in the world reported at the end of 2009, the Vatican said 275,542 were diocesan priests and 135,051 were members of religious orders. Ten

years earlier, there were only 265,012 diocesan priests, but there were 139,997 religious order priests, the Vatican said.

The worldwide increase, however, did not mean the number of priests increased on every continent, the newspaper reported. In North America, the number of diocesan clergy decreased 7 percent and the number of religious clergy fell by 21 percent, it said.

The uneven distribution of priests in the world is still remarkable but is easing a bit, the newspaper said. The ratio is changing not only because more priests are being ordained in Africa, Asia and Latin America, it said, but also because the average age of priests is much younger in those regions than in Europe and North America, so the death rate is lower.