Catholics in the Religion Census: An Overview

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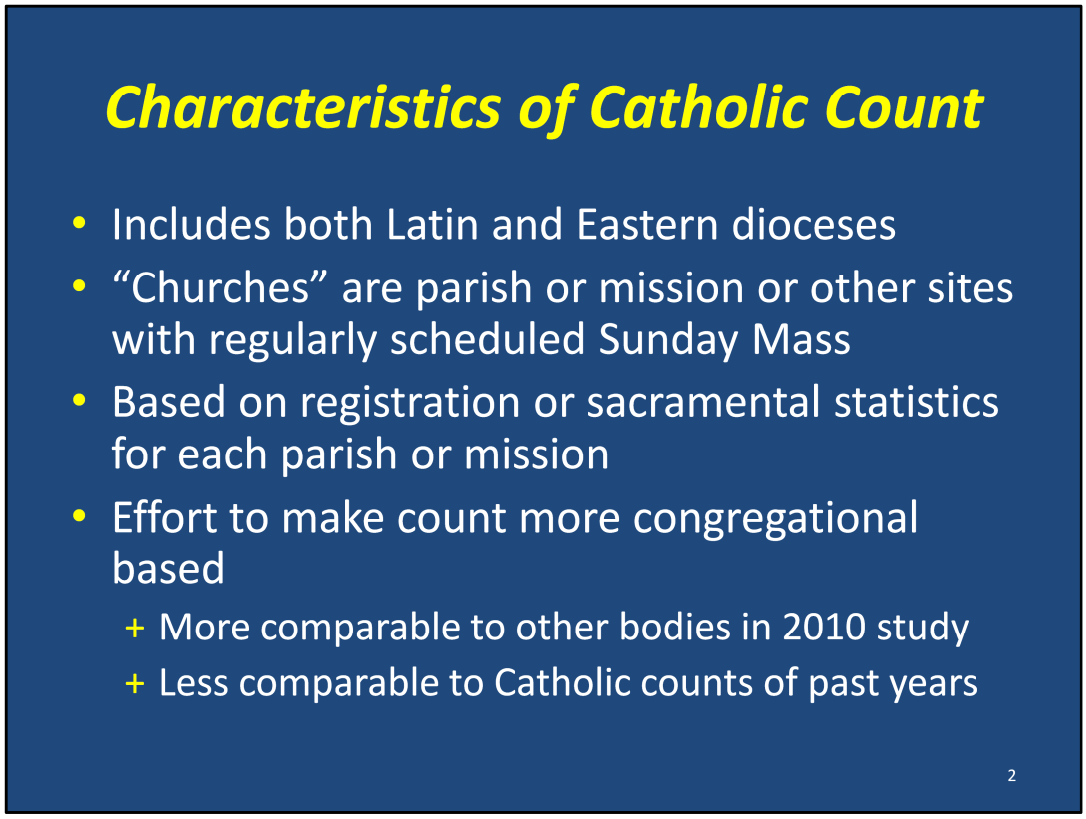
The 2010 Religion Census continues a decennial series conducted for more than a half-century by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies (ASARB), the Glenmary Research Center, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, and the National Council of Churches. Previous editions of the series were published in 2000, 1990, 1980, 1971, and 1952. The series is unique for its enumeration of religious bodies at a county level as well as for its differentiation among religious bodies of the same tradition (e.g., showing counts for different Baptist bodies).

The series follows in some ways late 19th-century and early 20th-century works of the U.S. Census Bureau to compile self-reported data on religious bodies. The Catholic Church has participated in all these, meaning the Religion Census 2010 continues a series on Catholic data more than a century old.

The ASARB Religion Census asks participating religious bodies to provide, at a level no greater than that of counties or their equivalents—of which there are currently 3,143 in the United States—data on their number of congregations and adherents. For the Catholic Church, this means requesting data from each diocese, typically the chancery or, if available, a research office. An increasing number of dioceses are making data available on-line, as, for example, in on-line diocesan directories listing statistics for individual parishes. The Glenmary Research Center collected the Catholic data for the 2010 Religion Census.

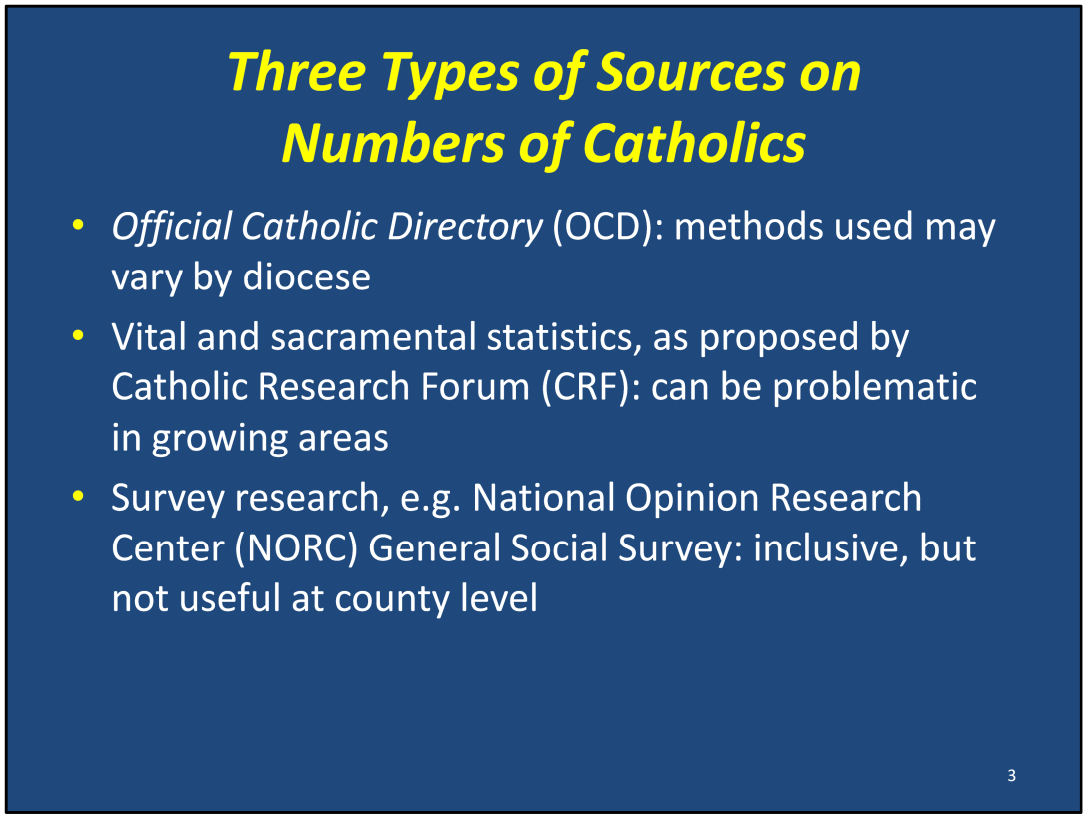


The Catholic data for the Religion Census includes that for both Eastern (e.g., Byzantine, Maronite, Melkite, Ukrainian) and more numerous Latin dioceses. The Religion Census has traditionally counted these churches together given that they are in full communion with each other.

The number of religious congregations or churches in the Religion Census includes parish churches, mission churches, and other sites with regularly scheduled Sunday Mass. For example, a consolidated parish maintaining two worship sites is counted as two churches.

For the 2010 Religion Census, we asked dioceses to provide parish- or church-level statistics on the number of registered households, registered individuals, infant baptisms in past year, deaths in past year, and weekly Mass attendance. Dioceses varied in their ability to provide these. We sought all these data so as to ensure the most accurate data possible. Where feasible, we reported the higher of the number of registered individuals or the number estimated from sacramental and vital statistics. Unfortunately, too few dioceses were able to report attendance to use in the 2010 study.

We sought these statistics to make the count more congregational-based, and hence more comparable to other religious bodies in what is, at core, a study of religious congregations and their membership. At the same time, making the data more congregational-based made it less comparable to Catholic counts of past years.

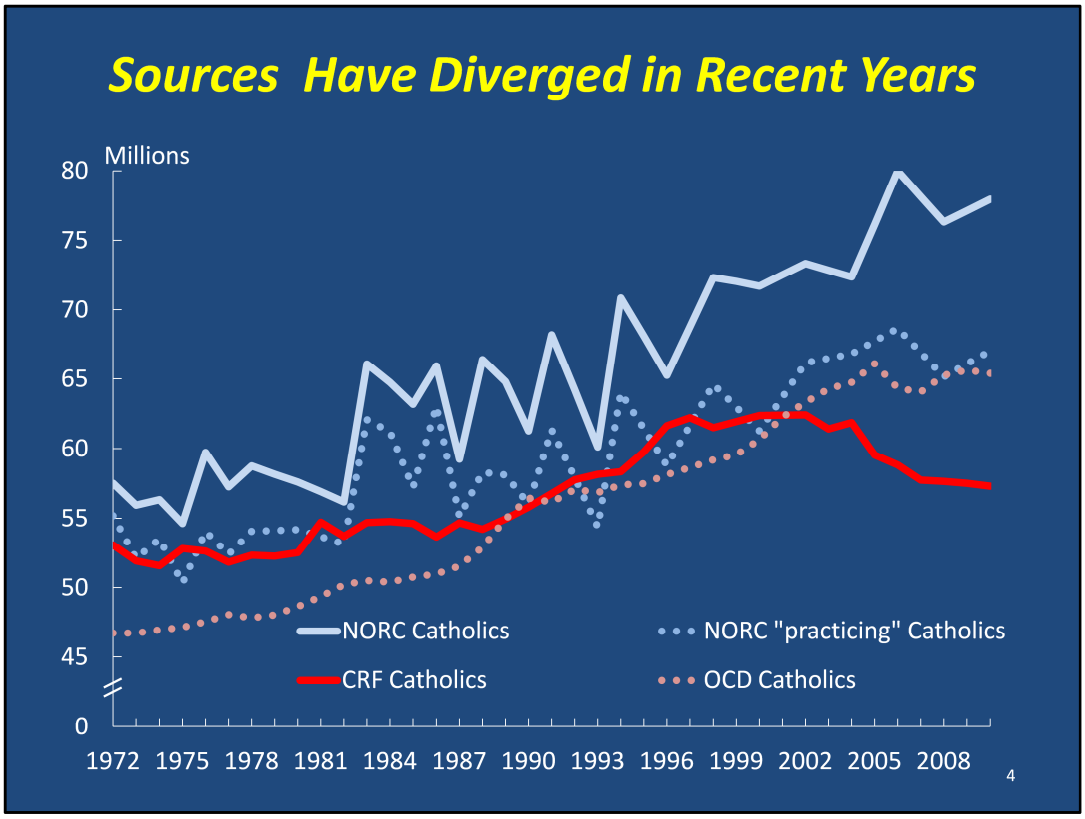


To provide some context and meaning to the Religion Census statistics, we note differing sources of Catholic data, and the advantages and disadvantages of each.

The *Official Catholic Directory* (OCD) lists annually, for each diocese in the United States, the number of individual Catholics within each diocese, as well as other diocesan-level statistics, including sacramental statistics. Unfortunately, the *OCD* does not present this data below the level of dioceses, which typically comprise many counties. Furthermore, dioceses appear to differ in how they calculate Catholic populations for the *OCD*.

The Catholic Research Forum (CRF) has proposed a method for estimating individual Catholics using sacramental and vital statistics, specifically infant baptism, birth, and death records. There is reason to assume that parishes maintain reasonably accurate sacramental records, especially for ensuring proper administration of sacraments such as Communion, Confirmation, and Marriage, providing an advantage to this method. At the same time, this method measures Catholic affiliation only at the beginning and end points of life, and hence misses variation within life, as well as possibly undercounting in areas with much migration, providing a disadvantage to this method.

Survey research is most advantageous in that it provides the most inclusive means for enumerating Catholics, as well as means for gauging level of affiliation with or participation in the Church. Furthermore, there is little ambiguity to what "Catholic" means in surveys of religious affiliation. At the same time, it is easier to claim one is Catholic than to take the steps the Church requires for affiliation. Individuals may also claim to be Catholic but not be affiliated with an individual church, the level of analysis for the Religion Census. Perhaps most problematic, particularly for local-level research, is that survey estimates are usually for broad areas, e.g., nation, state, or metropolitan area, and not feasible for estimating Catholic population by county.



The estimates that one might make of the Catholic population using these sources have varied increasingly over time.

The National Opinion Research Center (NORC) General Social Survey (GSS) has found that the proportion of adults claiming to be Catholic has been consistently around 25 percent in recent decades. Applying this number to the total population yields a Catholic population that has increased from about 55 million to more than 75 million in recent decades.

At the same time, the NORC GSS has shown some varying levels of affiliation within the Church over time. For example, applying a definition of “practicing” Catholic as one who reports going to church more frequently than “never” shows the number of Catholics has only increased from 55 million to 67 million in the past four decades, a rate of growth slower than that of the total population.

The Official Catholic Directory has shown the Catholic population increasing from 47 million to 65 million in the past four decades, and comprising about 22 percent of the population. Yet the *Directory* also shows Catholic infant baptisms and reported deaths, the key statistics for the CRF method, decreasing in the past decade, and with many dioceses now also reporting more deaths than infant baptisms. As a result, the Catholic population, as measured by the CRF method, has decreased in the past year.

As a result, whether the Church is growing depends largely on the definition one uses.

Religion Census Shows Catholics Are Two in Five Adherents, One in Five Persons

Grouping	Congregations	Adherents	% of population
Catholic	20,589	58,928,987	19.1
Black Protestant	17,754	4,877,067	1.6
Evangelical Protestant	191,112	50,013,803	14.3
Mainline Protestant	77,760	22,655,826	7.3
Orthodox Christian	2,551	1,056,535	0.3
Latter-day Saints	14,393	6,267,771	2.0
Other Faiths	11,661	6,667,542	2.2
Total*	344,894	150,686,156	48.8

*includes 9,074 congregations and 218,625 adherents of Other Christian bodies not listed above

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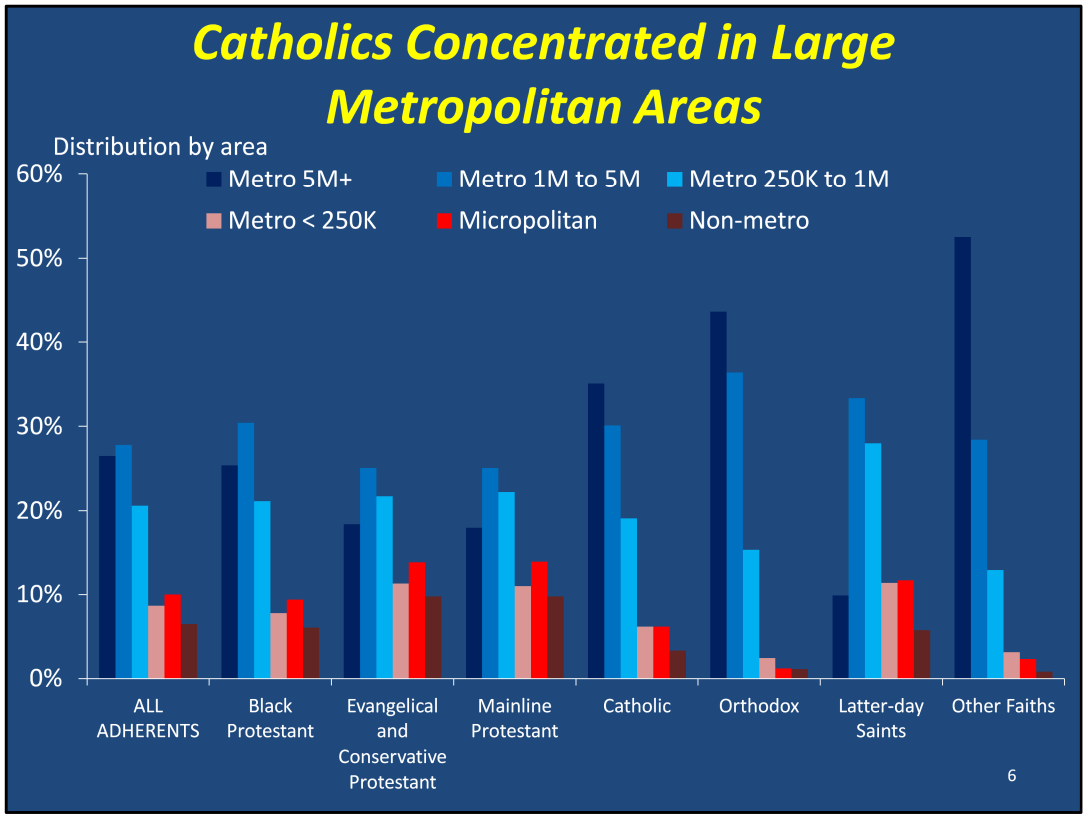
For the Religion Census, we sought a definition that showed the largest feasible number of individuals associated with a church, whether through sacraments, attendance, or registered membership. Altogether, we found about 59 million persons associated with a Catholic congregation in some way.

Though lower than some other estimates, this estimate still shows the Catholic Church to be the single-largest religious body in the United States. Altogether, we found about one in five Americans is associated with a specific Catholic congregation in some way. As noted earlier, still others may claim affiliation with the Church but may not perhaps be associated with a specific Catholic congregation.

The total number of Catholics in the Religion Census is about 30 million more than that for the Southern Baptist Convention, the second-largest religious body in the United States. Catholics also outnumber all Evangelical Protestants combined, although all Protestant groupings combined in the Religion Census outnumber the Catholic Church.

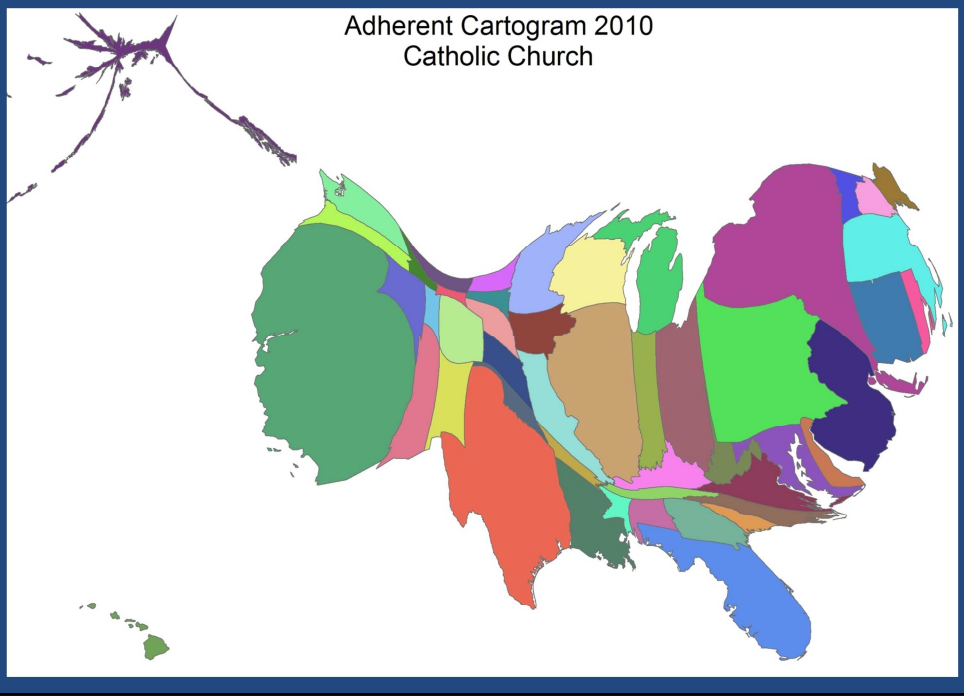


Catholics remain concentrated in large metropolitan areas. The figure above shows the distribution of all religious adherents and of different groupings of religious adherents by size of metropolitan area. For example, it shows that 26 percent of all religious adherents (whose distribution by metropolitan status largely reflects that of the total population) in the Religion Census are in metropolitan areas of at least 5 million residents, while 28 percent are in metropolitan areas of 1 million to 5 million residents.

Thirty-five percent of Catholics in the Religion Census are in metropolitan areas of at least 5 million residents, and an additional 30 percent are in metropolitan areas of 1 million to 5 million. This makes Catholics more metropolitan than most other religious groupings, although not as metropolitan as Orthodox Christians and persons of other faiths.

By contrast, only 3 percent of Catholics are in nonmetropolitan areas, and relatively few are also in micropolitan areas or small metropolitan areas. Catholics are less than half as likely to be in nonmetrpolitan areas as persons of other religious groupings are.

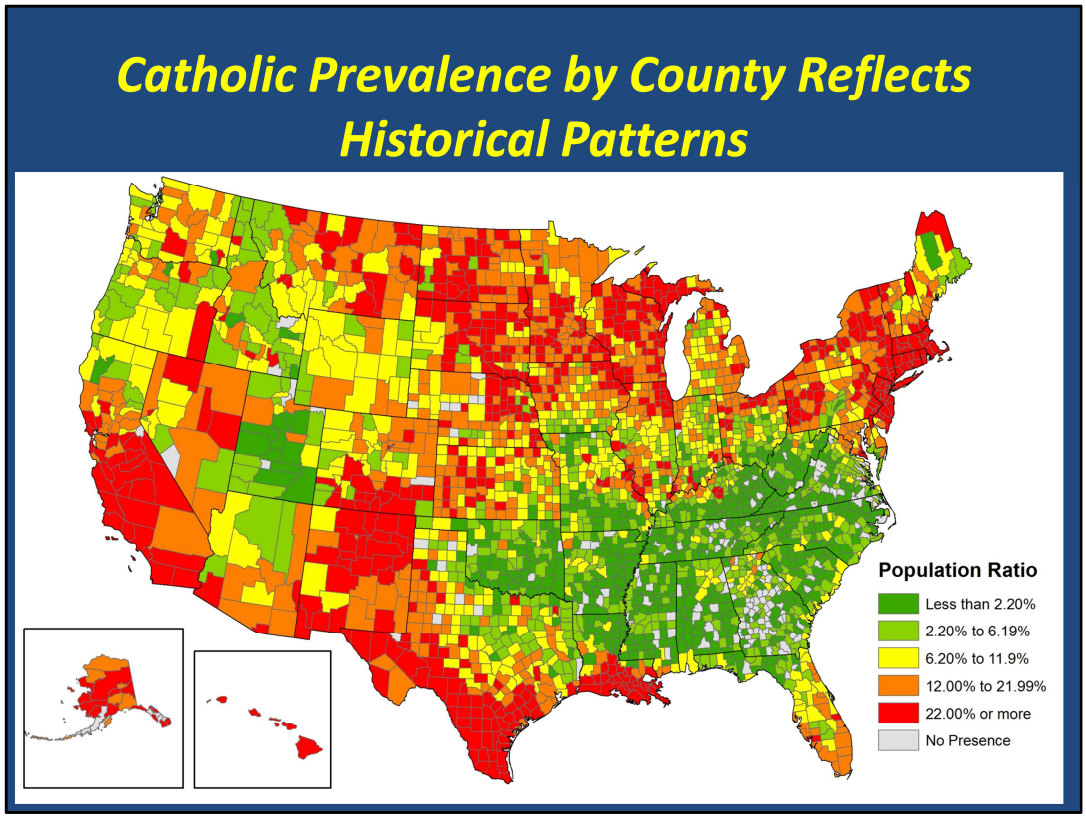
Catholics Concentrated in Northeast, California



Catholics are not only concentrated in certain types of areas, they are also concentrated in certain portions of the country.

The above cartogram, prepared by the Research Center of the Church of the Nazarene, shows how the United States would look if the size of each state reflected its share of the Catholic population.

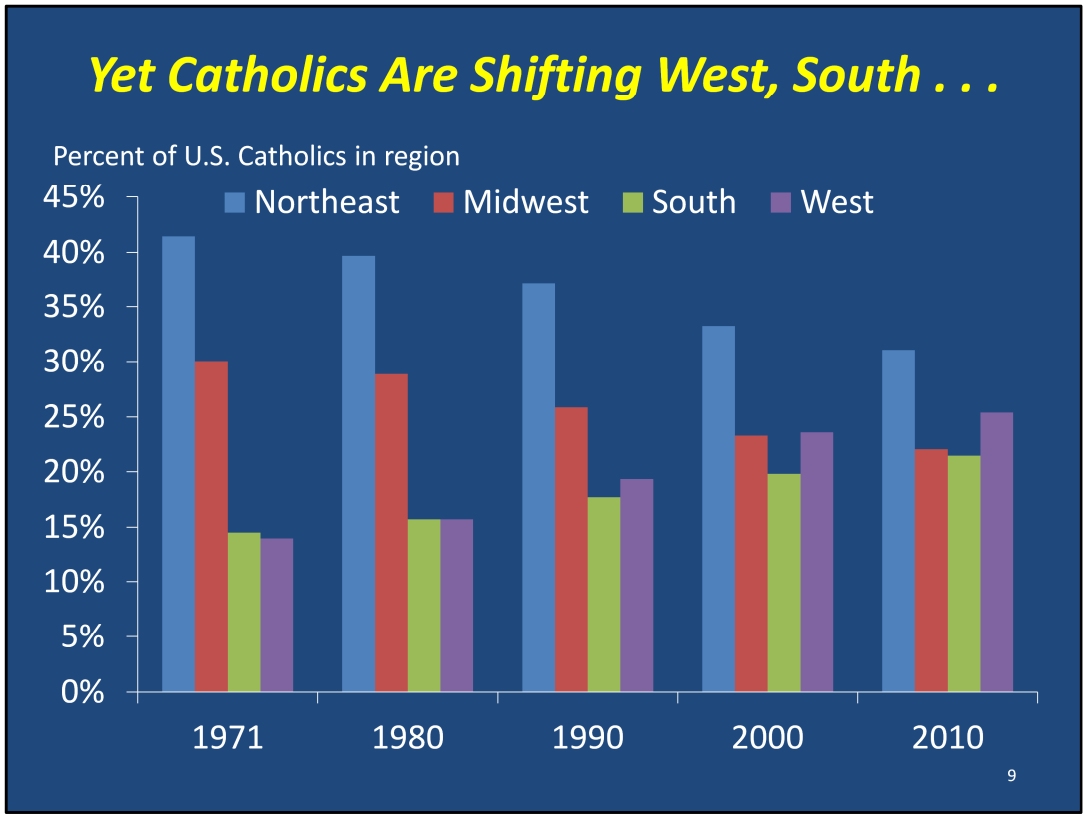
As the cartogram indicates, Catholics in the Religion Census are most concentrated in the Northeastern states and in California.



Mapping Catholic population presence by county also shows several current and historic concentrations of Catholic populations. The above map, also prepared by the Research Center of the Church of the Nazarene, groups counties into quintiles by their Catholic population percentage. It also includes a sixth category of counties with no Catholic presence.

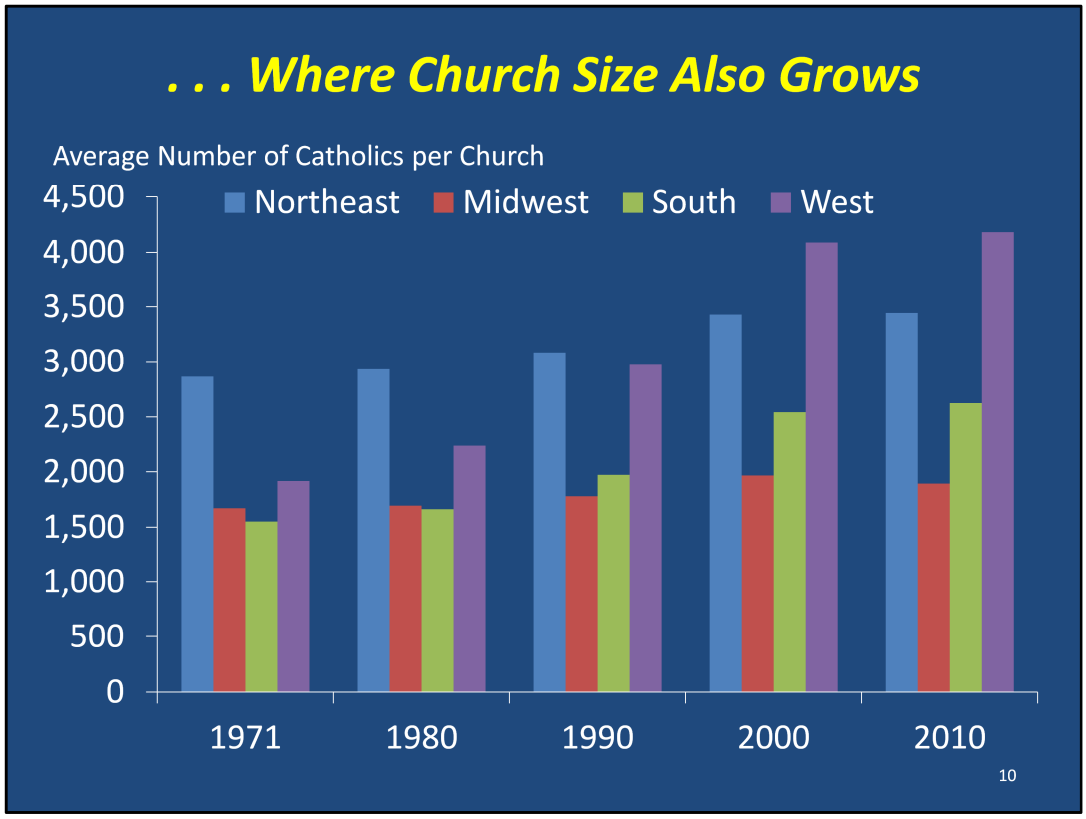
This map shows Catholics remain prevalent not only in California and Northeast, but also the North Central states, much of the Southwest and particularly near the Rio Grande, south Louisiana, and south Florida. They are also relatively numerous in pockets of the South, such as near the Louisville and Bardstown areas in Kentucky, home of the first Catholic diocese west of the Appalachians, and in Southern metropolitan areas.

Nevertheless, much of the South, particularly rural areas, continues to have relatively little Catholic presence. Most counties without a Catholic congregation or in which Catholics are less than 2.2 percent of the population are in the South.



While Catholic population distribution and prevalence has remained relatively stable over time, there are also some shifts occurring within it. The above figure shows the distribution of Catholics in the Religion Census by region since 1971. For example, it shows that 41 percent of Catholics in the 1971 Religion Census were in the Northeast, while, in 2010, 31 percent were.

The past four decades have seen a shift in the distribution of Catholics in the Religion Census from the Northeast and Midwest to the South and, especially, West. While the Midwest had the second-largest number of Catholics among the four regions of the nation in 1971, today it has the third-largest, and will likely be surpassed by the South soon. While the West had the smallest number of Catholics in 1971, today it has the second largest.

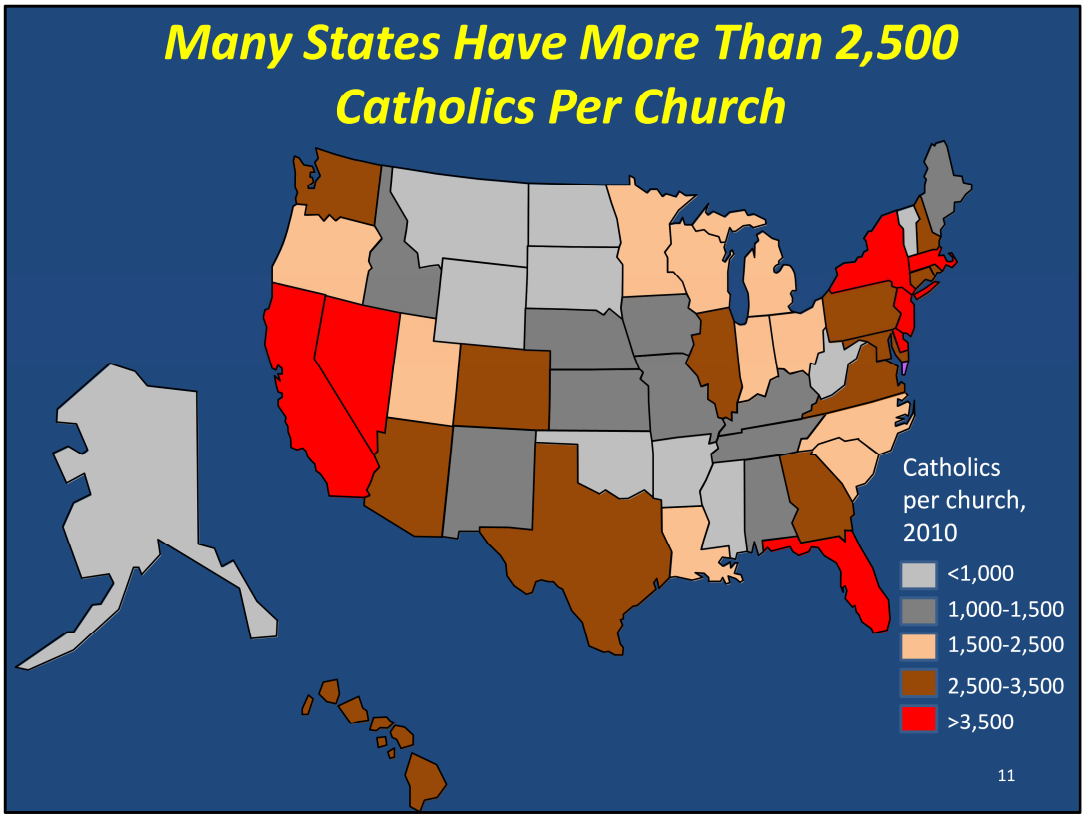


Individual Catholics are more likely to move than Catholic churches are. The number of Catholic churches in the Religion Census has remained relatively constant, at a little more than 20,000, since 1971, with the distribution of churches by region remaining relatively stable as well.

Because the number and distribution of Catholic churches has remained relatively stable, while the number of Catholic individuals has grown and their distribution changed significantly, the number of Catholic individuals per church has changed sharply by region.

In the Northeast, the average number of Catholics per church has increased since 1971. Nevertheless, because the number of Catholics grew more in the West, where the number of churches remained relatively stable, the West, rather than the Northeast, now has the largest number of Catholics per church.

Overall in recent decades, the number of Catholics per church has more than doubled in the West. It has also increased by more than two-thirds in the South.

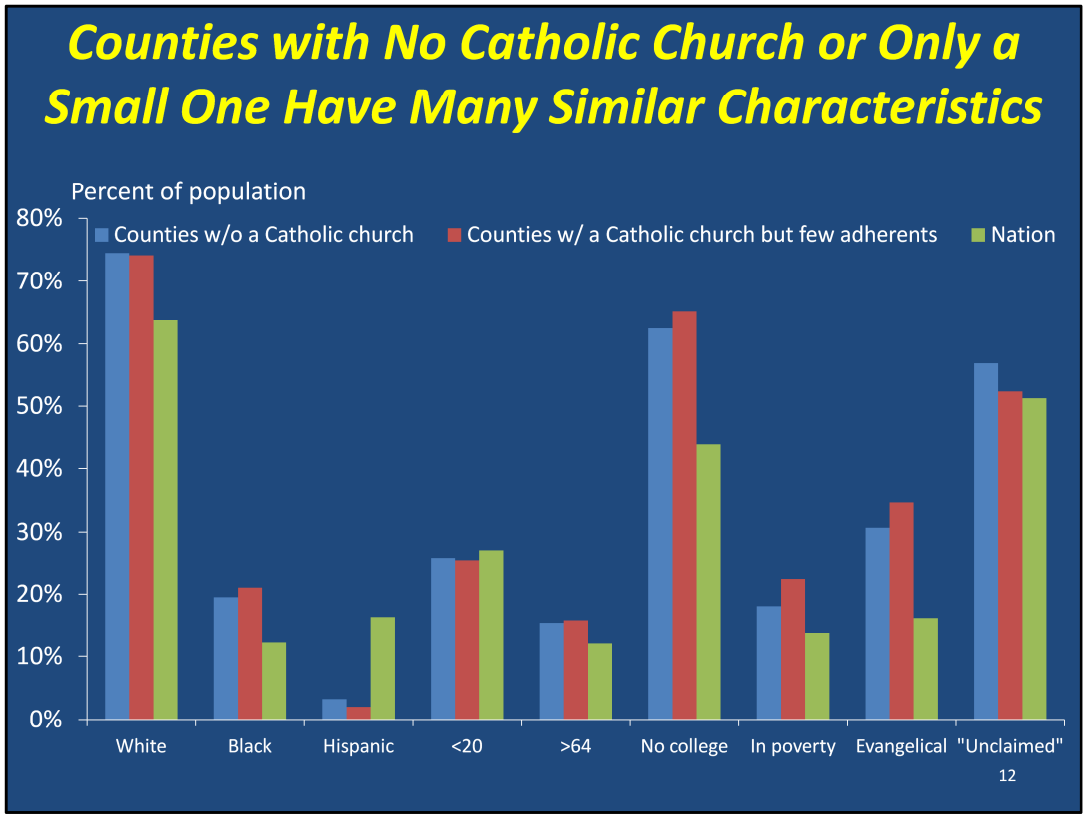


Across the nation, the average number of Catholics per church is nearly 3,000. This is, by far, the highest number of adherents per congregation reported by any religious body in the Religion Census.

Only two other bodies in the 2010 Religion Census (Traditional-temple Hindus and Muslims) report as many as 1,000 adherents per congregation. Only two other Christian bodies (Armenian Orthodox and Greek Orthodox) report as many as 800 adherents per congregation.

The number of Catholics per congregation does vary greatly by state. In California, there are now more than 8,000 Catholics per church. In Nevada, there are now more than 6,000. In several states, however, there are fewer than 1,000 Catholics per church.

Calculating average numbers of Catholics per church by county shows still wider variations, with nearly 150 counties reporting more than 5,000 Catholics per church—and nearly 200 reporting no Catholic churches, and nearly 200 more reporting one church with fewer than 100 adherents.



By enumerating congregations and their adherents, the Religion Census can provide insights into home-mission needs across the nation. Its counties without a Catholic church or with a single church but fewer than 100 adherents are more likely to have both white and black residents, and less likely to have Hispanics, than others. By age, areas of home-mission need do not differ greatly from other areas, but by socioeconomic status, including education and poverty status, they do. Counties with home-mission need are also more likely to have Evangelical Protestants, as well as persons not claimed by other bodies in the Religion Census, than others. Another presentation at the Religion Research Association meeting of 2012 provides further insights into home-mission territory characteristics.