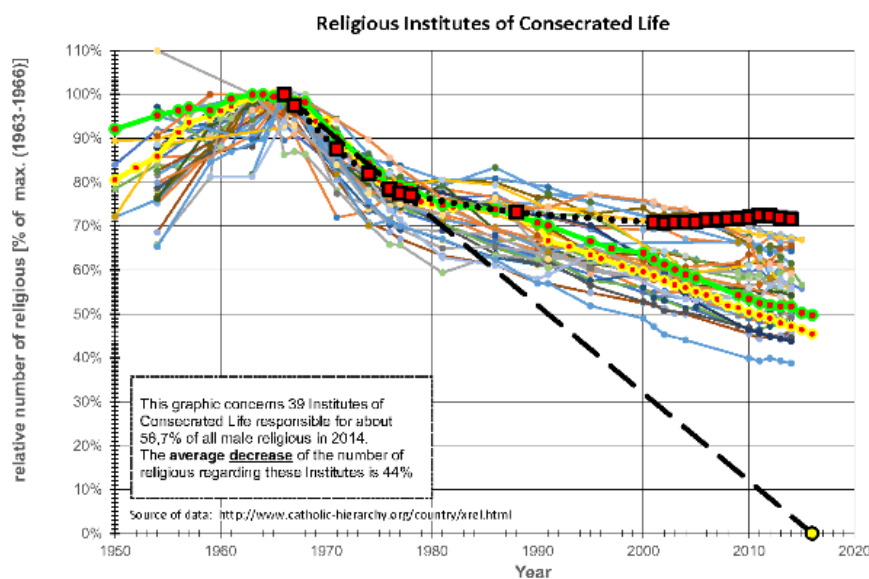


# Evidence of The Devastated Vineyard

## A Statistical Analysis of the Loss of Vocations in Religious Congregations Following the Second Vatican Council

Jack P. Oostveen<sup>I</sup> and David Sonnier<sup>II</sup>

“By their fruits you will know them” (Matt. 7, 15-16)



## 1 Introduction

The subject of the vocations crisis in the Catholic Church since Vatican II has been addressed many times in printed and electronic media, academia, and within ecclesiastical circles. Now that over fifty years have passed since the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council we can observe the development of patterns and attempt to understand why some religious orders are surviving while others, in fact the vast majority, are stagnant or dying. In this study we seek common traits among various religious groups by categorizing them according to patterns of either growth or decline from 1950 to the present. We will refer to these patterns as “characteristic timelines.” By grouping the various institutes among others with similar characteristic timelines, we can seek common threads among those which are thriving and those which are heading toward possible extinction. We can also identify the point at which flourishing religious institutes began to decline. According to St. Matthew “*By their fruits you will know them*” (Matt. 7, 15-16).

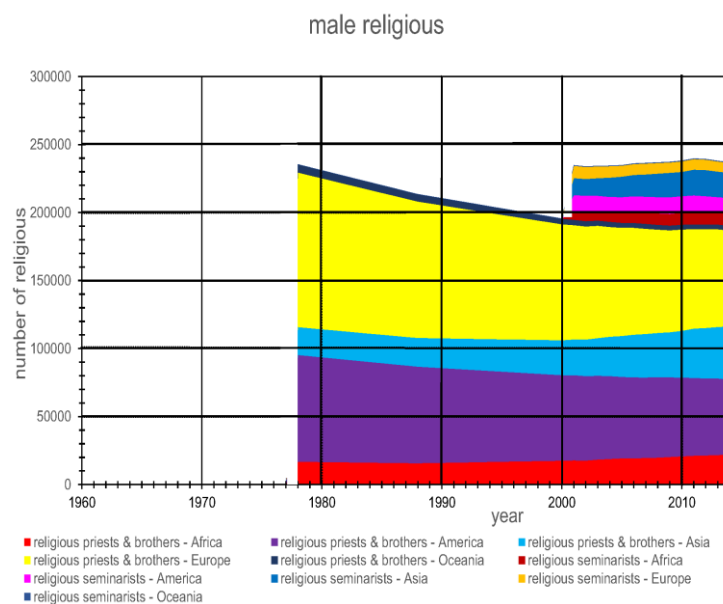
This study is an abbreviated version of an observational analysis of data from the public domain pertaining to Institutes of Consecrated and Societies of Apostolic Life for male religious over the period from 1950 to the present ([Fruits of Vatican II, A Wilful Ignorance of an Ongoing Catastrophe](#)).

<sup>I</sup> Emeritus Assistant Professor of Soil Mechanics and Foundation Engineering, Delft University of Technology

<sup>II</sup> Associate Professor of Computer Science and Director of International Studies Program, Lyon College

## 2. Data Sets and Background

The data used in this study has been taken from the public domain. From ‘*The Hierarchy of the Catholic Church*’ [1], we compiled a list of 167 Institutes of Consecrated Life and 43 Institutes of Apostolic Life, (male religious only in both cases). For 140 of these 210 institutes this list contains sufficient data for analysis. Additionally a few editions of the *Annuario Pontificio* are used [2]. Other databases available in the public domain such as *Agenzia Fides* [3], *GCatholic.org* (formerly Giga-Catholic Information) [4] and *CARA* [5] are restricted in the terms of sampling periods and/or geographic location. Among these databases, *Agenzia Fides* provides the total number of all religious for the period from 2001 to 2014 (Figure 1) which we can add to that from ‘*The Hierarchy of the Catholic Church*’. *Agenzia Fides* does not distinguish among the various religious congregation but it provides interesting distinctions among various regions of the world for the period from 2001 to 2014. This database also provides the total number of all religious in 2014, providing insight in the data that may be lacking in others such as ‘*The Hierarchy of the Catholic Church*’ [1].

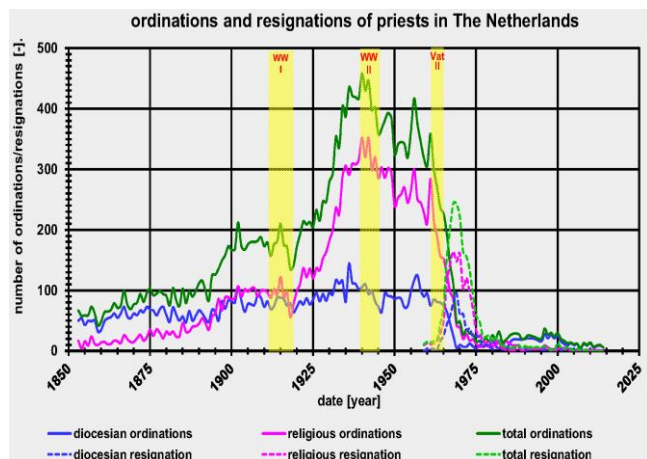


**Figure 1: Male religious - 1978 -2000 (EWTN [6]) and 2001-2014 (Agenzia Fides [3])**

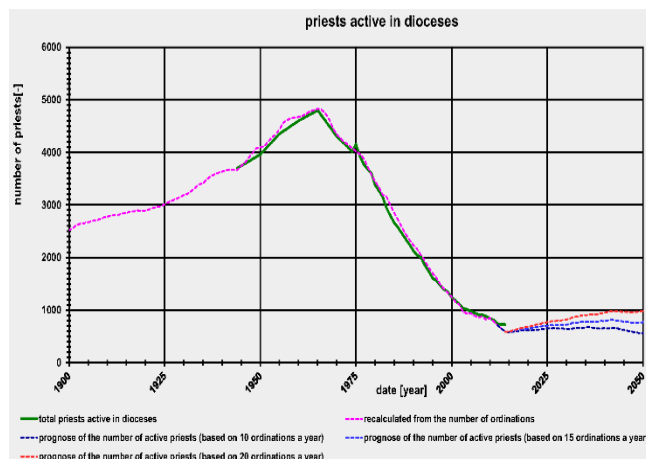
Figure 1, from the dataset of *Agenzia Fides*, provides an immediate insight into the regional specificity of the crisis; that is, it affects primarily Europe and the Americas (primarily North, but to a lesser degree Central and South). Africa and Asia show an increase in religious vocations [7], compensating somewhat for the decline in Europe and the Americas.

Nowhere is there a better example of the devastating loss than the Catholic Church in The Netherlands. This was the subject of the first systematic analysis of the sudden and precipitous decline of the clerical population [8], [9]. The beginning of a dramatic decline of ordinations was observed in the year 1963 for religious and 1965 for the diocesan priests. An astonishing increase of resignations can be observed between 1964 and 1976 with a maximum at 1970 for both religious and diocesan priests.

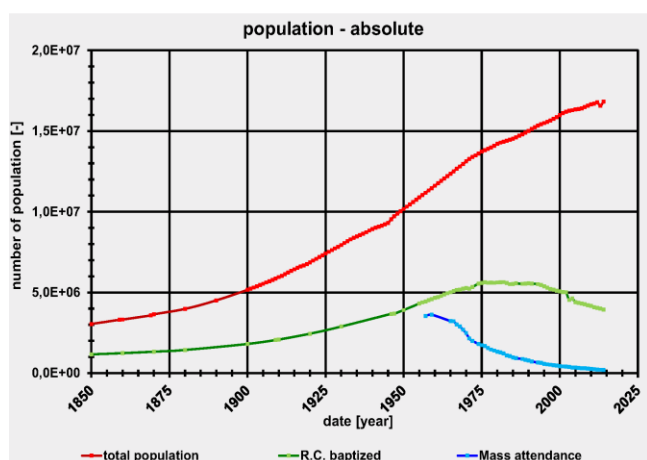
This data is depicted in Figure 2 through Figure 5. Figure 2 illustrates the clerical population in The Netherlands since 1850. Although The Netherlands was neutral during World War I (1912-1918) and therefore not directly involved in this war, the steady growth was partly interrupted by the war and its aftermath. The second interruption we can see in the graph is a result of World War II (1940-1945) and the immediate aftermath. After that there is a visible post-war recovery. But throughout this period (1853 to the present) of the Catholic Church in the Netherlands, there is nothing quite as dramatic as the decline that begins in 1963. As the graph clearly shows, the damage caused by World Wars I and II combined was negligible compared to the devastation beginning with and following the Second Vatican Council.



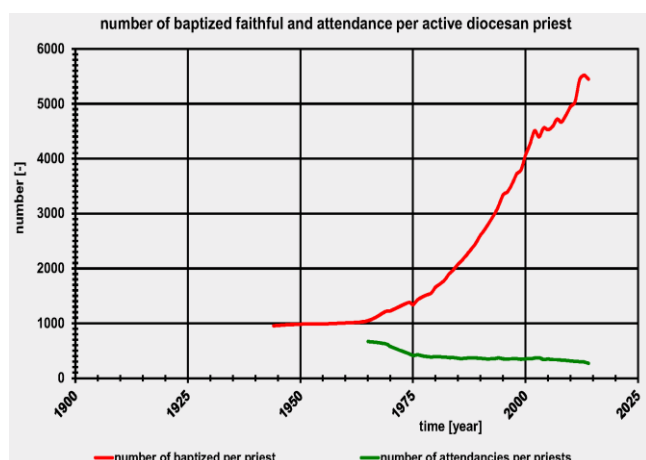
**Figure 2: Ordinations and resignations after the restoration of the Hierarchy in The Netherlands in 1853**



**Figure 3: Active priests in Dutch dioceses from 1900, including extrapolations to 2050**



**Figure 4: Total populations, Dutch and Roman Catholic from 1850 to the present, as well as the Mass attendance from 1958**



**Figure 5: Total faithful per diocesan priest from 1950 compared with the number of Faithful attending Mass**

The dramatic decline among the religious ordinations began at the time of the publication of the Council Document on the Liturgy '*Sacrosanctum Concilium*.' In 1963, immediately after the publication of this document, liturgical experiments commenced in the Netherlands even while they were still illicit. The most active proponents of experimentation were the religious, whose influence cannot be overstated. Figure 2 shows a decline in the number of religious ordinations annually from about 300 in 1962 to about 25 in 1970 and less than 5 a year after 1975. At the diocesan seminaries these liturgical experiments began in 1965, and after they became legal all seminarians were obligated to participate in them, not merely to observe them. Through numerous witnesses, as well as from the statistical data, it is widely understood that there were numerous vocations lost due to these liturgical experiments. Seminarians lost their vocations to the point that the number of diocesan ordinations went from around 80 to 100 before 1965 to 5 or less after 1969.

Following 1963, in addition to the sudden high dropout rate of the seminarians we begin to see mass resignations from the priesthood. The cumulative effect is a serious decline in the number of priests who are active in the Dutch dioceses (Figure 3). In Figure 4 we observe that the number of baptized faithful was still increasing until the second half of the nineteen-seventies. Serious decline did not begin until the nineties. We can see the Mass attendance had already declined during the second half of the sixties, a decline that eventually accelerated throughout the seventies. The continued decline can be considered as a secondary effect due to the lack of young people. Figure 5 shows these effects on the proportionality

between the number of faithful per priest distinguishing between the total baptized and the practicing faithful. The stable proportion of about 1000 faithful per priest prior to 1965 has given way to a rather stable figure of about 300 practising faithful per priest today.

Throughout Europe and The Americas events unfolded similarly. Kenneth Jones provides some statistics and analysis pertaining to the situation in the US Church in *Index of Leading Catholic Indicators* [10]. Subsequent analysis specifically correlating the decline of vocations to the state of the liturgy can be found at [11], [12] and [13], but confining the discussion to within the Catholic Church in the USA. Similarly, in France a correlation has been made between the growth or decline of religious institutes, correlating their growth or decline to the way they manifest themselves as religious, in particular the way they dress [14]. General discussion of the problem can be found at [15], [16] and [17]. The “*Risk analysis of Vatican II*” [18] provides a comprehensive study dealing with the issue on a broader scale, throughout the universal Church and provides an in-depth and systematic analysis of causes, actors, and consequences.

### 3 General Observations

This study includes 110 Institutes of Consecrated Life and 24 Societies of Apostolic Life for which we have sufficient data for analysis. It is important to note that all of these institutes experienced a prolonged period of steady growth for decades prior to the Second Vatican Council. The vast majority went into decline following the Second Vatican Council. The diversity of institutes that went through a period of decline is stunning. There are very few similarities among these organizations other than the fact that they are all Catholic and they all suffered some form of decline beginning between 1963 and 1966. This prevents one from speculating on a cause other than Vatican II itself, since each of these congregations, in its own way, responded to the canonical reforms and underwent internal changes. For the Institutes of Consecrated Life, the overall membership has declined from 256,137 in 1967 to 162,732 in 2014. For the Societies of Apostolic Life, membership has declined from 25,347 religious in 1967 to 14,038 religious in 2014. This represents a total decline for these congregations of about 36.5% and 44.6% respectively between 1967 and 2014. In other words, they have suffered an average decline to a level of 55.4% for the Societies of Apostolic Life, and a decline to a level of 63.5% for the Institutes of Consecrated Life. These 134 institutes represent about 74% of all religious in 2014. We also use data from 14 congregations representing about 1.5% of all religious in 2014 which were founded after 1967 and therefore counted zero at that time. These particular 14 congregations are not a complete list of those founded after 1967.

Universally these institutes underwent an increase in the number of male religious prior to 1963 with a rate of increase varying from 0.5% to 2% per year. Considering an estimated average religious lifetime of about 50 years, a natural declining rate of -2% per year can be expected if there are no vocations. This means that the actual rate of increase can be compared with an effective vocation rate of 3 to 4 % per year which is equal to an average of 1.5 to 2 religious vocation inspired during the religious life time of each religious. Of the 134 religious congregations represented in this study, this led to a maximum of 281,848 religious in 1967. Note that an average inspiration of 1 vocation during a religious lifetime for each religious results in a constant number of religious per congregation. In case of growth of the number of faithful, this is factually a relative decline of the overall religiousness of the people.

During and immediately following the Second Vatican Council a sharp decline began that, with a few exceptions, continues to the present. The point at which decline begins varies typically between 1963 and 1967. Regarding the 134 congregations from our data set, we can pinpoint the beginning of the decline based on membership. About 32% of the congregations, representing then 118,907 religious (including the Franciscans Minor, Capuchins, Dominicans, Redemptorists and Benedictines) had their statistically registered maximum membership in 1963. About 9%, representing 60,289 religious (including the Jesuits and the Society of Divine Word) statistically registered their maximum in 1966. About 55% of these congregations (including the Salesians) representing 102,548 religious, met this maximum membership in 1967. Only a few congregations (5%) were observed to find their maximum membership in the early seventies. The vast majority of the religious of Consecrated Life were subject to this precipitous vocation decline for the first decade after the Council.

Throughout the period from 2001 to 2014, worldwide, there is an actual modest growth in the total number of religious of about 0.15% per year. Figure 6 shows the data from Figure 1 compared to the timelines of the restricted 134 congregations studied herein (about 75% of the religious in 2014). The decline from more than 281,484 religious in 1967 to 236,937 in 2014 in these 134 congregations is compensated for throughout the period. Extrapolating the 2001 to 2012 rate into the past to 1976 shows that in 1976 these 134 congregations would have represented about 90% to 95% of all religious. We can also observe that the slight decline of the number of all religious since 2012 are due to the decline within these 134 congregations.

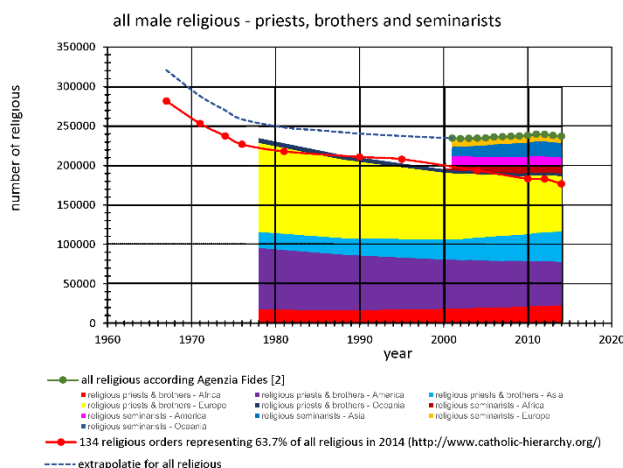


Figure 6: Reconstruction of the timeline of all religious

## 4 Methodology

The institutes for which we have sufficient data for analysis are grouped by characteristic timelines that can be distinguished from one another. By grouping them in this manner we can seek out similarities among these institutes which share some similarities. Brief observations of their similarities are stated where it is possible to do so, but an extensive study of how some have “weathered the storm” better than others is a subject for future study. The data used for the timelines is provided by [1] and [4], and is cross-referenced against [19] and [20] for accuracy.

Seven different categories were established for this section. They are represented in Figures 9 to 16 and are the following:

- Category 1: Institutes in Severe (Figure 9) and Extreme (Figure 10) Decline
- Category 2: Institutes in Decline but Eventually Finding Stability (Figure 11)
- Category 3: Institutes in Decline but Eventually Reaching a Slow Rate of Growth (Figure 12)
- Category 4: Institutes Eventually Restoring the Pre-1965 Membership Level (Figure 13)
- Category 5: Institutes Eventually Restoring the Pre-1965 Rate of Growth (Figure 14)
- Category 6: Institutes Suffering no Post-1965 Decline (Figure 15)
- Category 7: Institutes founded after 1967 (Figure 16)

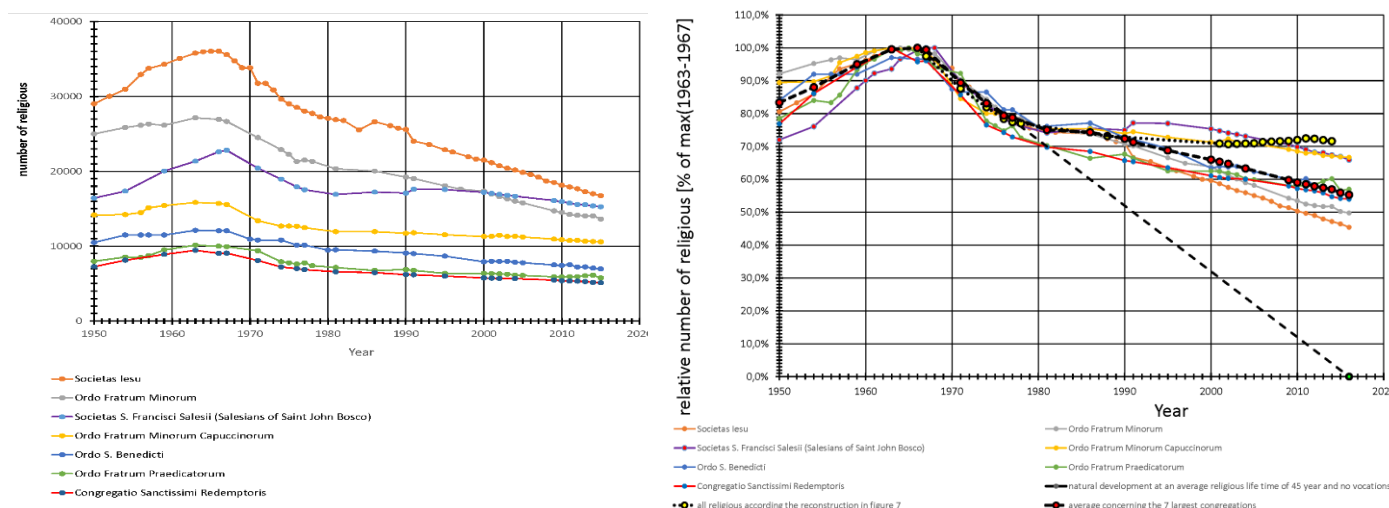
We must first provide some caveats.

**First**, because the institutes have been grouped together into a single timeline and are being compared to one another, changes are sharper for smaller institutes than they are with larger ones. For instance, if an institute of only 25 religious loses a single member in a year that will be represented by a 4% drop on the graph.



**Second**, it must be taken into consideration that, especially regarding the smaller institutes, a single charismatic leader can exert a very strong influence. The loss of such a charismatic leader, for any reason, can have a dramatic effect on the timeline. In such cases, we cannot link a drop in vocations to the Second Vatican Council and its implementation.

**Third**, the seven largest institutes (Jesuits, Franciscans, Salesians, Capuchins, Benedictines, Dominicans and Redemptorists) represented about 39.5% of all religious in 2014. Because of the large number of religious represented by these seven institutes, their trends strongly influence the average results. While the average decline of 110 Institutes of Consecrated Life is 37.2%, the average decline of these Institutes can be estimated at about 43%, while the decline of the Jesuits and Franciscans is 52.8% and 48.2% respectively (**Figure 7**).



**Figure 7: Timelines of the Seven Largest Institutes of Consecrated Life [1]**

(Left: by absolute numbers of religious - right: by numbers relative to their maximum)

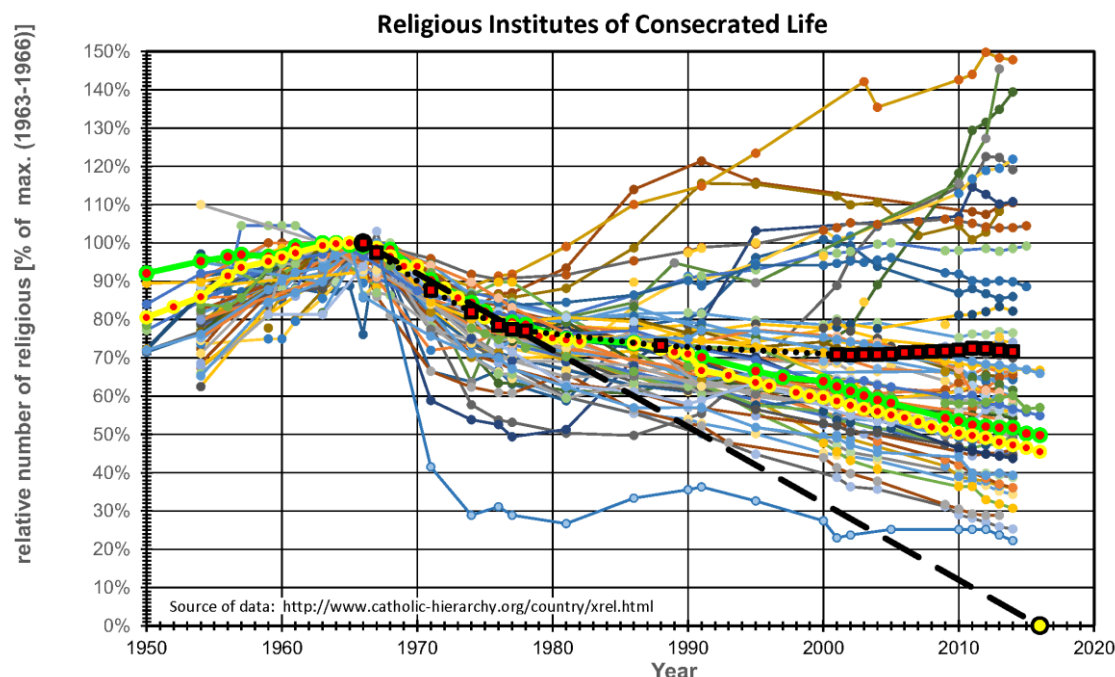
Figure 9 to Figure 16 are all marked by two reference curves:

- The black dashed curve represents the average natural decline with an estimated religious life time of 50 years if there are no vocations. Decline that is structurally steeper than this curve indicates a situation where the number of resignations or losses exceeds the number of vocations. A vocation rate of 2% per year, corresponding to an inspiration of 1 vocation per religious within his religious life time, is needed to keep a constant number of religious.
- The black dotted curve represents the average actual development of all religious as reconstructed in Figure 6 based on the data available.

## 5 Institutes Grouped According to Characteristic Timelines

Figure 8 shows the timelines of those religious institutes that represent Categories 1 to 5. This is the vast majority, leaving out those institutes in Category 6 (there are only five of them) that suffered no post-conciliar decline, and also leaving out those in Category 7 which were founded after 1967.

The nearly universal nature of the crisis is evident in Figure 8. We will deal with each category individually.



**Figure 8: Timelines of 67 Institutes of Consecrated Life**

### 5.1 Category 1: Institutes in Severe and Extreme Decline

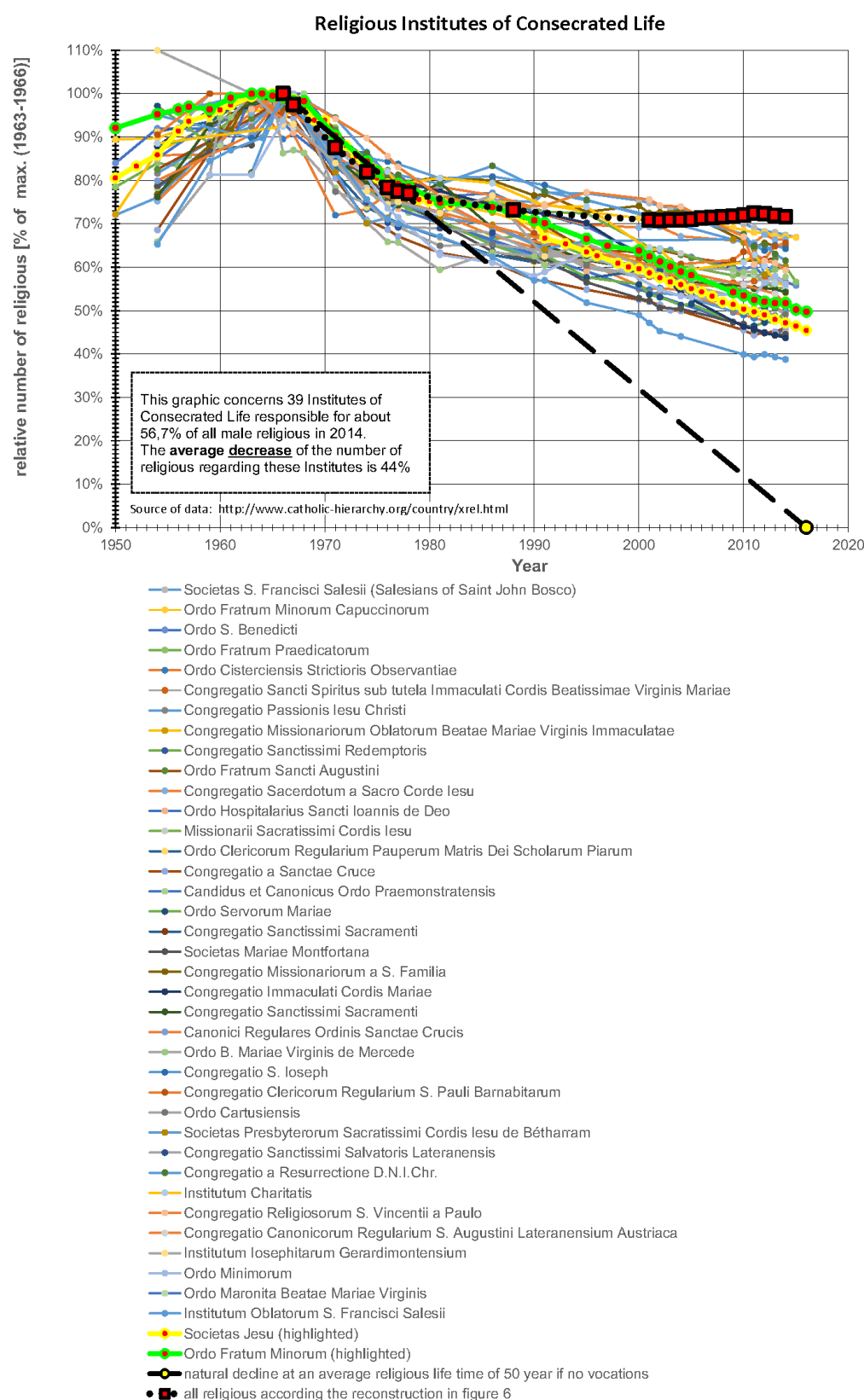
Figure 9 and Figure 10 concern 39 and 7 institutes, respectively, representing, 74.2% and 4.7% of the religious (110 institutes in 1966) that have been reduced to 63.1% and 2.4% of these religious in 2014 respectively. Both figures show an initial severe decline during the first decade after Vatican II, and then around 1975-1976 a moderation of the rate of decline. All of them continue to decline until the last known data obtained for 2014. They differ only in severity. Those institutes whose timelines are depicted in Figure 10 show a more extreme decline than the institutes in Figure 9.

Figure 9 includes all large institutes such as Jesuits, Franciscans, Salesians, Benedictines and Dominicans. The Jesuits and Franciscans together and by themselves represent 24% of the 110 religious Institutes of Consecrated Life in 1966 and 19% of these religious in 2014 and have therefore a tremendous influence on the average timeline curve. Remarkably the timelines of the Jesuits and the Franciscans followed the average curve very well until about 1985. After 1985 the timelines of these institutes diverge from the average by an increasing decline of about -1% per year. While the average decline of all these religious in 2014 is about 38.1% of their high point, the decline of these two institutes are about 53.5% and 48.2% respectively. In other words, by 2014 the Jesuits and Franciscans have been reduced to about half of their 1966 numbers and the decline continues.

This category also includes the Benedictines, within which there is not a universal decline. Notable exceptions would be the Benedictine Monasteries at Le Barroux, Norcia, and Fontgombault. Our Lady of the Annunciation at Clear Creek, Oklahoma was founded on a former ranch in the wilderness in 2000 A.D. with twelve monks; it now has over fifty with at least a handful of monks still in their late teens at any given time. So while they are a part of the larger “Benedictines” of Category 1, those Benedictines who retain a traditional prayer life belong in another category in a future study.

The diversity of institutes in this category is alarming. Between the reclusive and contemplative Carthusian Congregation (Ordo Cartusienis), known for its strictness and adherence to Gregorian chant, to the Jesuits (Societas Jesu), with their emphasis on scholarship and evangelism, there are almost no similarities among these organizations other than the fact that they all suffered a steady, observable decline

after Vatican II. Since each of these congregations, in its own way, responded to the canonical reforms and underwent internal changes, the decline could be due to no cause other than Vatican II.

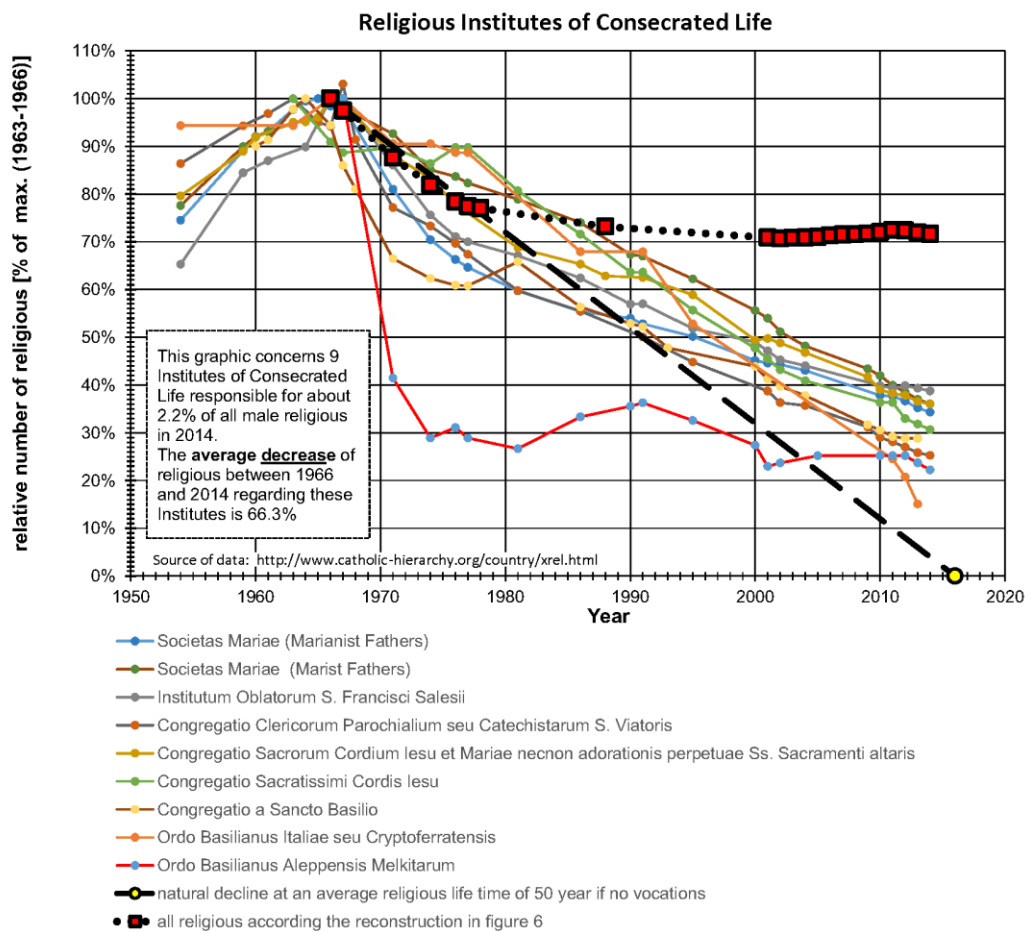


**Figure 9: Institutes in Severe Decline**

A note should be made about the **Basilian Alepian Order** (*Ordo Basilianus Aleppensis Melkitarum*) whose trend is radically different from the others in Figure 10. Its immediate and extreme decline started at the same time as the others, but from 1973 onwards there is a certain stability not demonstrated by the others.



They are a religious order of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church; hence they were shielded from many of the liturgical and doctrinal disturbances following Vatican II. Without further information, we can speculate that the timing of their decline is coincidental, and that the decline is related to disturbances in the Middle East rather than liturgical and doctrinal disturbances.



**Figure 10: Institutes in Extreme Decline**

## 5.2 Category 2: Institutes in Decline but Eventually Finding Stability

In opposition to Figure 9 and Figure 10, the nine institutes in Figure 11 exhibit, after the initial post-Vatican II decline, a period of stability beginning about 1980. These nine clustered institutes represented about 7.4% of the religious of the 110 Institutes of Consecrated Life in 1966 and represent about 8.8% of these religious in 2014. Given the dramatic decline shown in Figure 9 and Figure 10 such can even be considered as a relative growth over the period after 1976.

Considering the nine institutes depicted in Figure 11, while it may be difficult to find a unifying feature among them, nonetheless individually they offer some clues as to why they achieved stability. The **Salvatorians** (*Societas Divini Salvatoris*), for example, are engaged in parish, school, and missionary work [21], which would suggest that they have ample access to young people considering a possible vocation to religious or consecrated life. The same could be said for the **Mercedarians** (*Ordo B. Mariae Virginis de Mercede*) who, like the Salvatorians, have a strong presence in teen ministry and parish ministry [22]. It is worth mentioning that this congregation maintains the use of the habit and a full community life of prayer in addition to their external ministries.

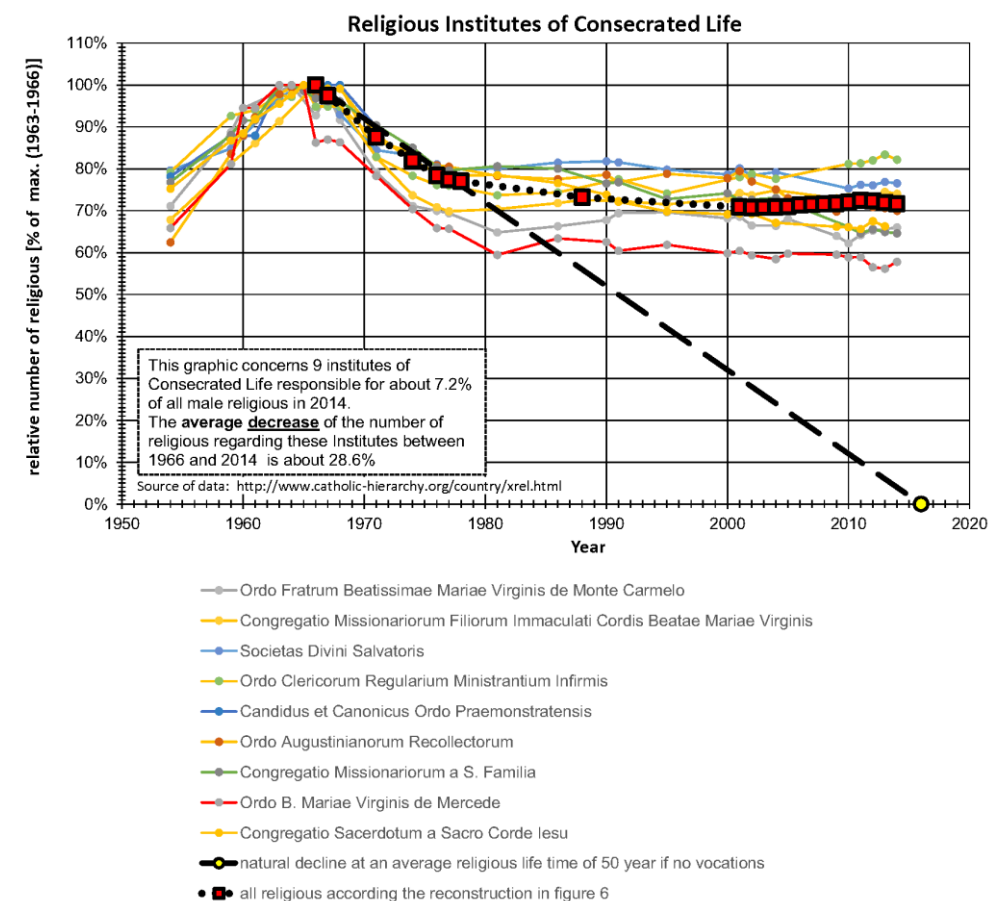


Figure 11: Institutes in Decline but Eventually Finding Stability

### 5.3 Category 3: Institutes Initially Declining but Eventually Reaching a Slow Rate of Growth

Figure 12 depicts timelines of three institutes representing about 5.2% of the mentioned religious of Consecrated Life in 1966 and 8.4% of the religious in 2014. After the decline in the first decade following Vatican II, these institutes stabilized and began to grow at a rate sufficient to reach a rather constant membership in 2000. Then after 2000 two of these institutes seem to stabilize at that level, while the third decreases again.

What was said about the eight groups under the preceding heading can largely be repeated in this category. The **Conventual Franciscans** (*Ordo Fratrum Minorum Conventualium*) are well known for their parish ministry in several shrines and basilicas. They, like the Mercedarians, maintain the use of the habit on a regular basis and may, therefore, attract many vocations among the people to whom they minister.

The **Society of the Divine Word** (*Societas Verbi Divini*) is somewhat different. They are engaged in parish ministry, but they are not usually assigned in larger groups or communities like the other houses that have been mentioned previously. Nonetheless, they share with the other groups a focus on missionary work, especially in growing areas of the Church such as Africa, Latin America, and Oceania [23]. Along with this, they have a lay missionary program, so there is a reasonable visibility to possible discerners.

### 5.4 Category 4: Institutes Eventually Restoring the Pre-1965 Membership Level

Figure 13 shows a very remarkable development of the timelines of six institutes representing only 0.8% of the mentioned religious in 1966 and 1.6% in 2014. After the decrease of the number of religious in the first decade for some of these institutes, even to about 50%, the number of religious then increased rather rapidly by a rate of 2.5%/year until a sudden stabilisation occurred.

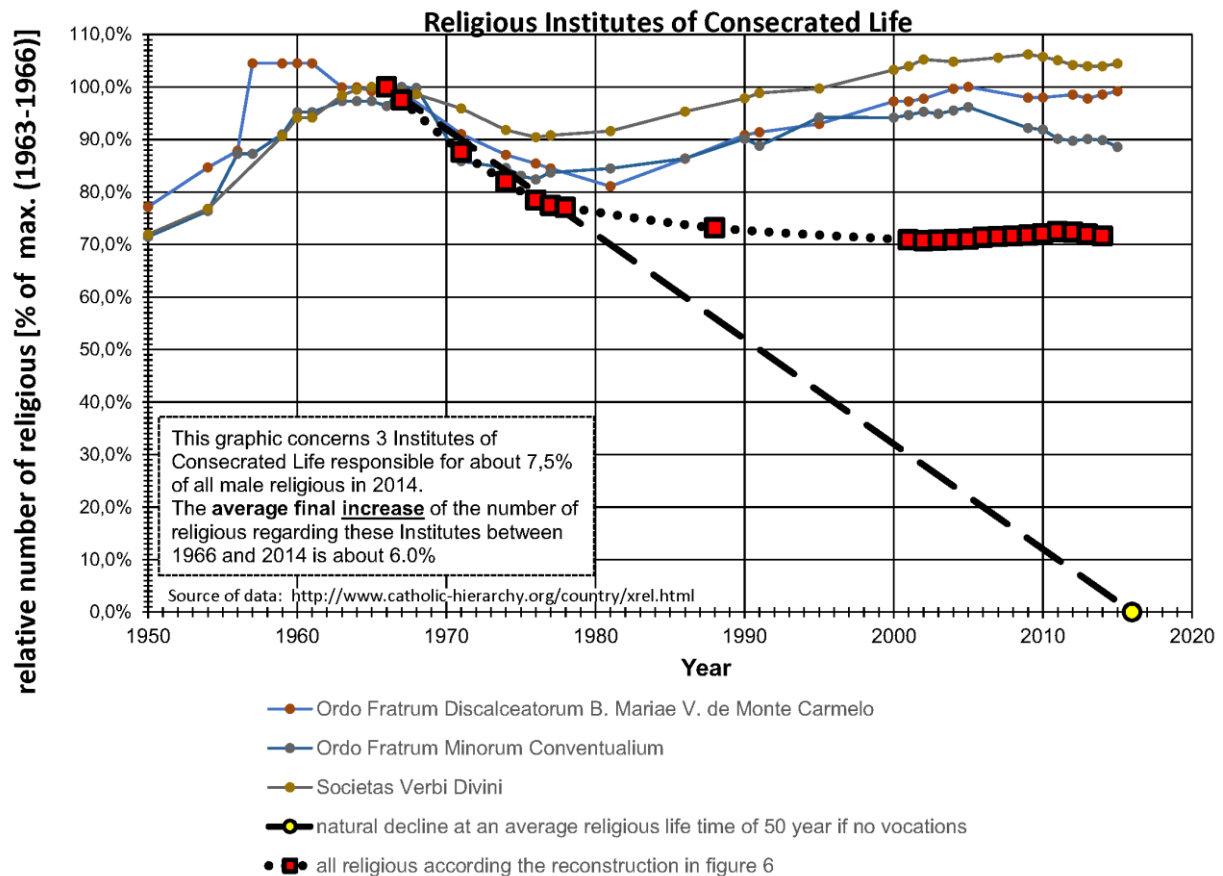


Figure 12: Institutes in Decline but Eventually Reaching Slow Rate of Growth

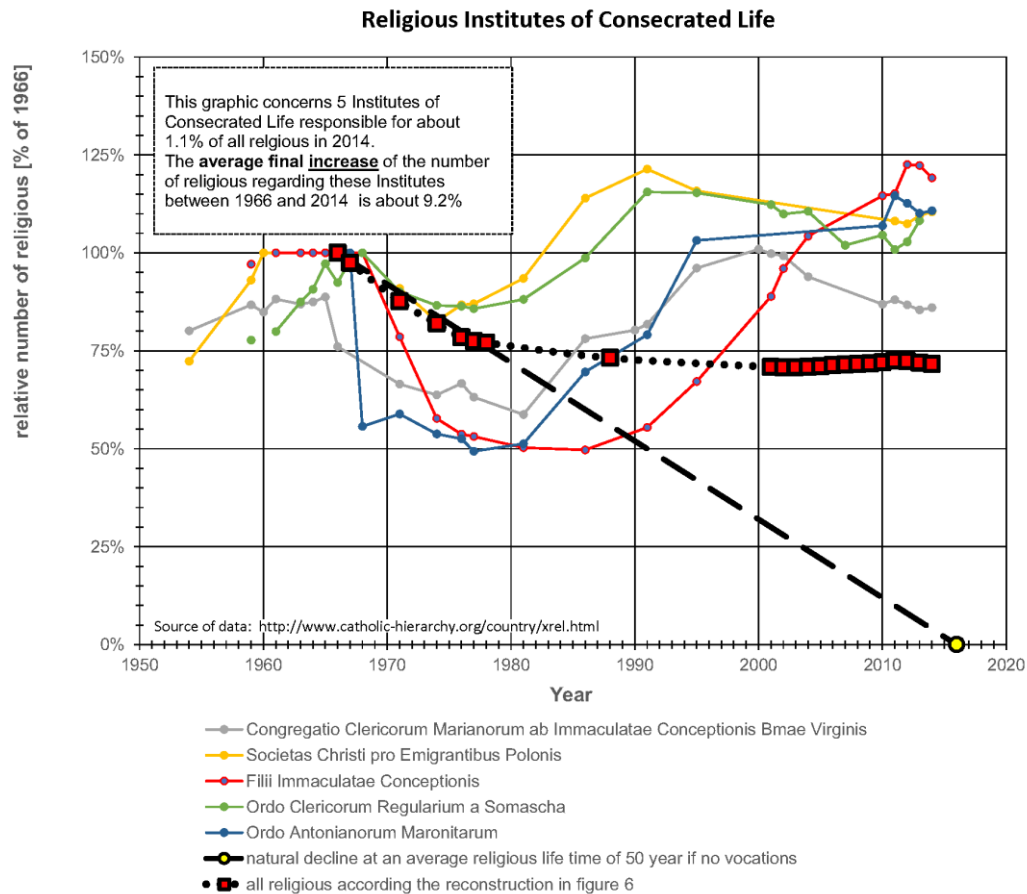
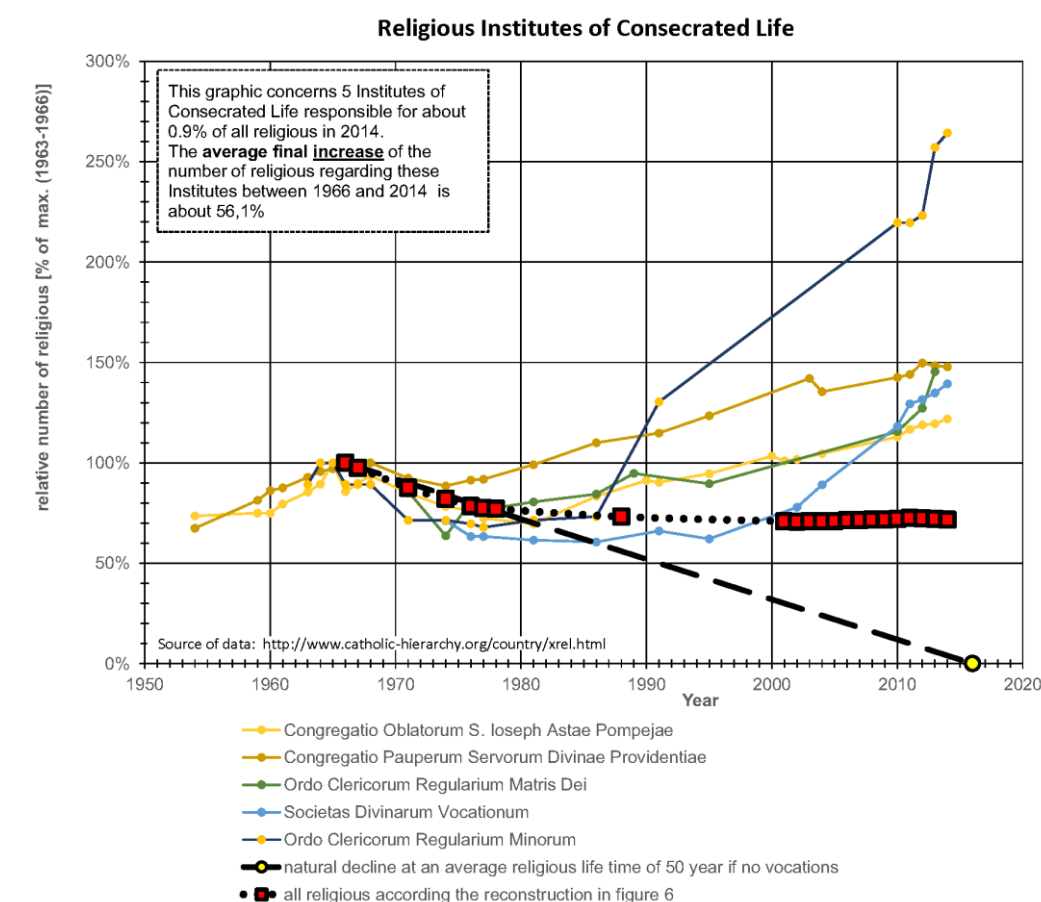


Figure 13: Institutes Eventually Restoring Pre-1965 Membership Level

One thing to be noticed about these organizations is their strong association with nationalities outside of Western Europe. In the case of the *Societas Christi pro Emigrantibus Polonis* (The Society of Christ for Polish Emigrants), for example, a congregation specifically designated for the care of the Polish flourished during a period of time presided over by a Polish pope. This is not particularly surprising. It is notable that their most profound period of growth happened at the height of the papacy of Pope John Paul II. At the same time the *Ordo Antonianorum Maronitarum*, a congregation attached to the Maronite Rite, which maintains most of its traditional ritual, increased in number. This suggests a growth in congregations attached to a more stable liturgical tradition. Like other Churches in the Eastern tradition, the Maronites were at least partly shielded from the well-known reforms that were implemented so vigorously in the West and they may have benefited by attracting Catholics seeking stability.

### 5.5 Category 5: Institutes Eventually Restoring the Pre-1965 Rate of Growth

Figure 14 shows a cluster of institutes representing 0.3% of these religious institutes of Consecrated Life in 1966 and 0.6% in 2014. The timelines of these institutes show an eventual restoration of a rate of growth similar to that experienced prior to Vatican II. After a moderate decline in the first decade after the council, they increase up to 2014. These institutes have grown to about 140% to 150% of their number of religious in 1966.



**Figure 14: Institutes Eventually Restoring Pre-1965 Rate of Growth**

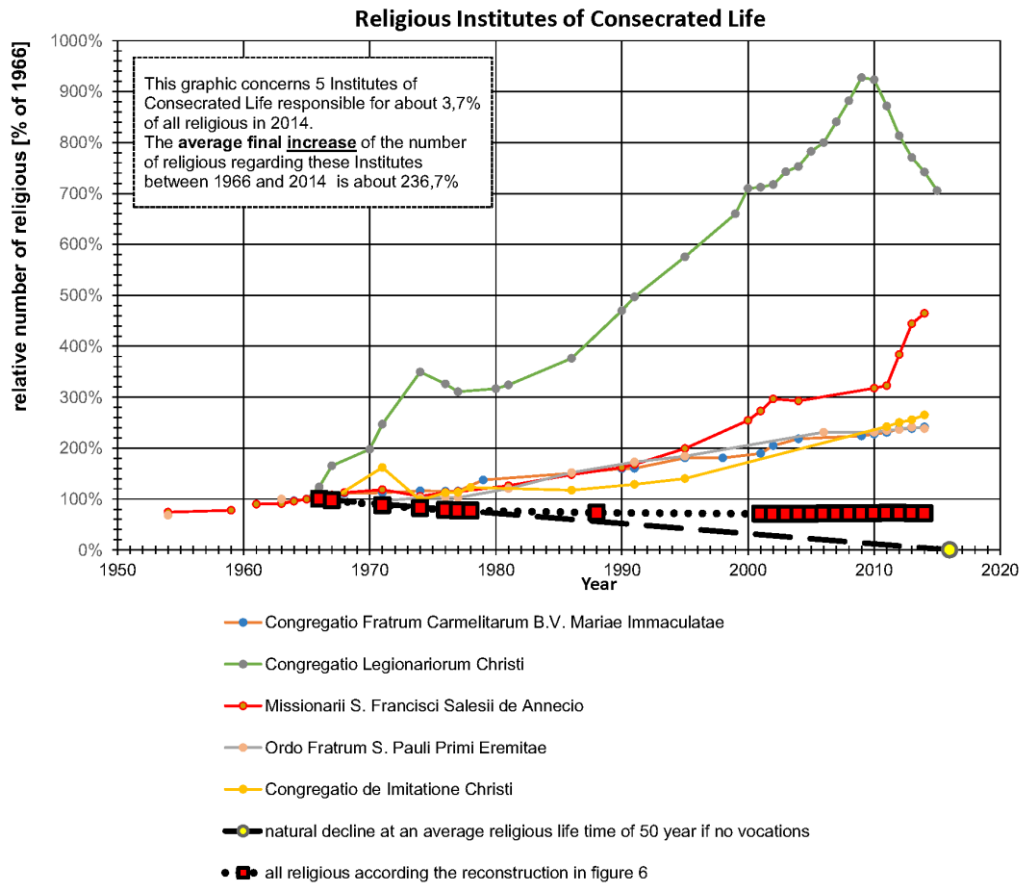


Figure 15: Institutes Suffering no Post-Conciliar Decline

## 5.6 Category 6: Institutes Suffering no Post-1965 Decline

Figure 15 shows five institutes representing in 1966 only 0.8% of the religious but by 2014 their proportion had increased to 4.3% of the mentioned religious. This was partly due to the overall average decline but was also due to the increase of the number of religious of these institutes themselves. Evidently these institutes did not suffer the post-conciliar decline during the first decade after Vatican II. While one of these institutes made a remarkable increase of the number of religious up to about 750% in 2009, the other institutes grew to about 250% to 300% with respect to the numbers in 1966.

Here we should note that this analysis also marks irregularities that can be caused by specific events. An example can be seen in the timeline of the **Legionnaires of Christ** (*Congregatio Legionariorum Christi*) that shows a sudden collapse after a strong growth of the Institute. This sudden and extreme decline was due to well-publicized internal problems. However it can also be observed that some other institutes seem to have derived some benefit from this event by a sudden increase of the number of religious, such as perhaps the **Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales d'Annecy** (*Missionarii S. Francisci Salesii de Annecio*).

## 5.7 Category 7: Institutes founded after 1967

Figure 16 gives the timelines in absolute values for both eight Institutes of Consecrated Life and six Societies for Apostolic Life that have been founded after the Second Vatican Council. The membership of these institutes cannot be expressed in relative values regarding a maximum number of religious during the period of the Council. As of 2014 these 14 religious congregations represented about 1.6% of all religious.



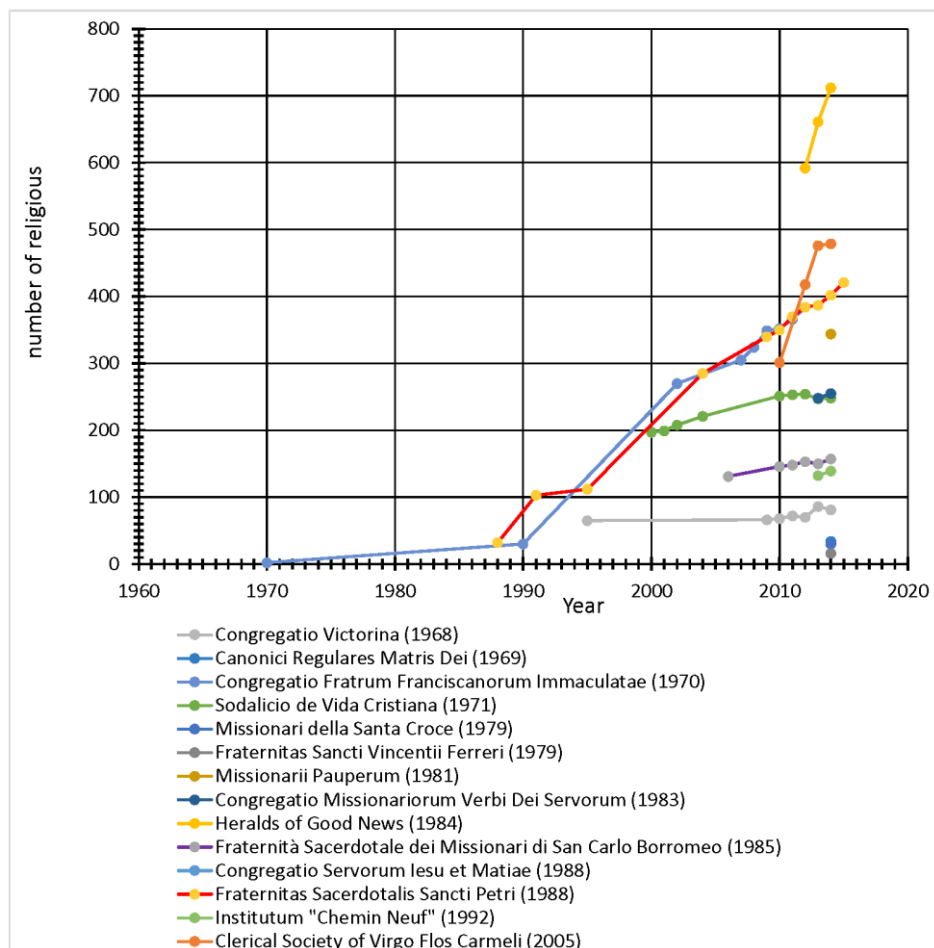


Figure 16: Institutes founded After 1967

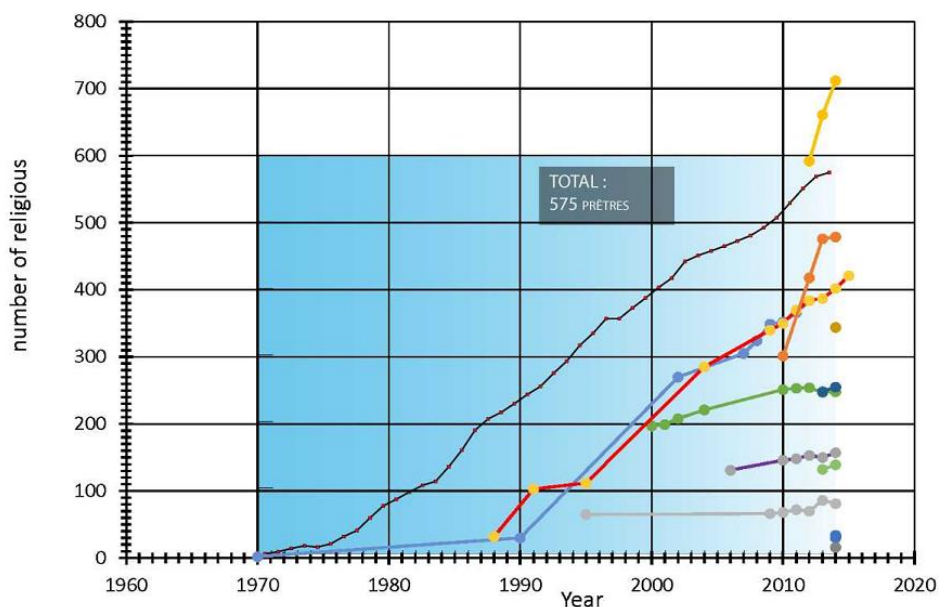


Figure 17: Previous Figure With Overlay of SSPX Clerical Population

Of those institutes whose timelines are depicted in Figure 16 we can ask ourselves what they have in common, aside from the fact that they were founded at a time of liturgical and doctrinal crisis in the Church. They all, in some way, are meeting the challenges of today. Each of them is confronting the crisis through sound liturgy, sound doctrine, teaching, preaching, or living their religious lives in accordance with the Deposit of Faith.

This study would not be complete without drawing attention to the **Priestly Fraternity of Saint Peter** (*Fraternitas Sacerdotalis Sancti Petri*) in Figure 16, and then drawing attention to the Figure 17, which shows

the growth of the **Society of Saint Pius X** (*Fraternitas Sacerdotalis Sancti Pie X*) since its founding in 1970 alongside the institutes depicted in Figure 16. While we await the clarification of the canonical status and the role of the latter within the Church, we should draw attention to several important facts:

- The Society of Saint Pius X was established under the Diocese of Fribourg at a time of tremendous confusion over liturgy and doctrine, in the face of unanswered questions that have since been answered (in *Summorum Ponticum* [26] and the decree signed by Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, Prefect of the Congregation of Bishops, on January 21, 2009 [27]).
- The Fraternity of Saint Peter was born from within the ranks of the Society of Saint Pius X; whether or not it could not have come into existence any other way is beside the point.
- The rates of growth of both institutes are within a few points of having parallel slopes and both reflect a rate of growth that was common prior to Vatican II.
- According to St. Matthew: *“By their fruits you shall know them.”*

Given the depth of the current crisis, described visually in so many of the previous figures, it is inconsistent for any prelate or cleric concerned for the good of the Church or the salvation of souls to simultaneously hold a determined resistance to cooperation with a society of religious life whose only fault is lack of canonical status within the Church. The statistics herein seem to validate the basis on which they were founded in 1970.

## 6 Analysis

Despite the fact that this report contains objective facts and statistical analysis and is therefore of quantitative nature, it has a qualitative aspect. It is an indicator of the quality of the spiritual nature of religious congregations. According to St. Matthew: *“By their fruits you shall know them. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit, and the evil tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can an evil tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit, shall be cut down, and shall be cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits you shall know them.”* (Matt. 7, 16-20). Moreover, such statistics can objectively indicate a distinction between the work of the spirit of time (*zeitgeist*) and the work of the Holy Spirit in the modern Church. The Holy Spirit cannot be held responsible for a long term continued decline of a congregation, if we are to believe the words of St. Matthew.

### 6.1 Universality of the Decline

One of the more obvious points that we can take away from the statistical observations above is that a dramatic decline of the number of male religious is manifest, and that this decline followed a period of decades of steady growth for all of these institutes. The decline began between 1963 and 1966, and continues to the present for most religious congregations. Only 5 of the 134 previously mentioned congregations did not suffer decline during the first decade after the council (Figure 15). One must suspend rational thinking to avoid relating this near-universal effect to the ecumenical council which took place immediately before the decline.

Figure 8 shows the wide variation of the rate of decline during the first decade after the Council. In contrast to the widely-variant decline after the Second Vatican Council the data shows that there was a preconciliar growth rate that varied between +1% per year and +2% per year during the period 1950 to 1962. The postconciliar decline was accompanied by a high degree of instability. This instability, an indicator of confusion, can also be found among the various branches of religious institutes, such as the Society of Jesus (Figures 18 and 19) and the Salesians of Don Bosco (Figure 20). This was also true for the diocesan clergy in the Netherlands (Figures 2 through 5) the USA (Figure 21), Great Britain, England and Wales (Figure 22) [24]. In all cases there was a stable growth rate that existed for several decades before the Second Vatican Council.

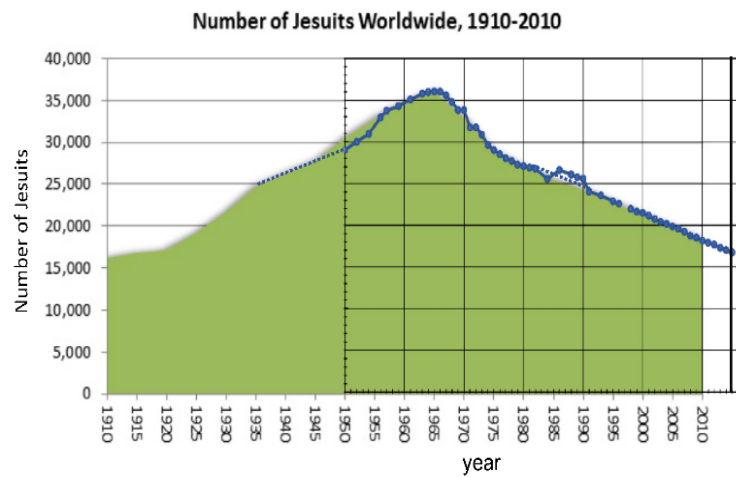


Figure 18: Comparison Data Concerning the Jesuits [1] [19]

“By their fruits you will know them” (Matt. 7, 15-16)

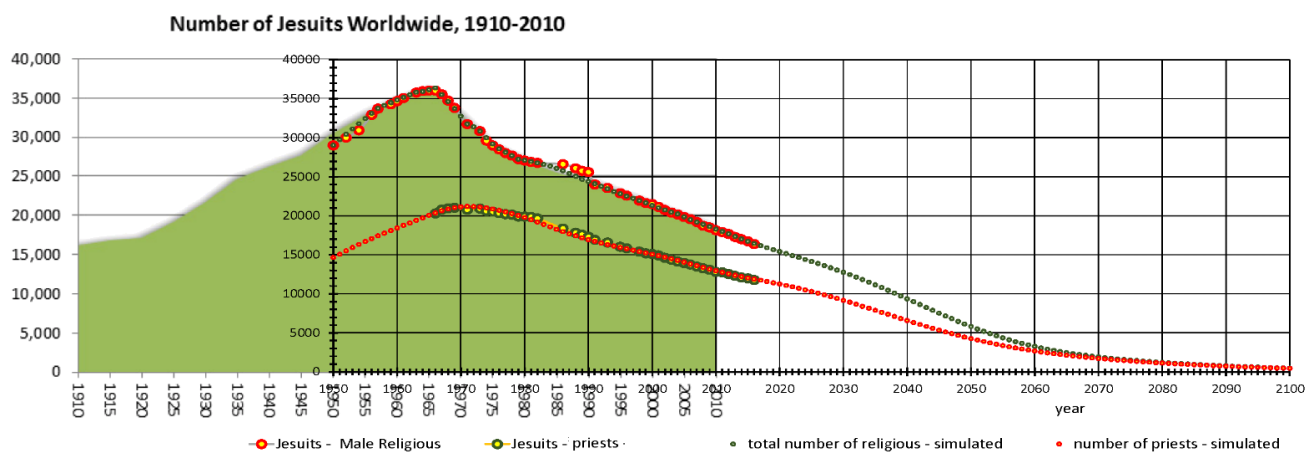


Figure 19: Future of the Society of Jesus: Extinction

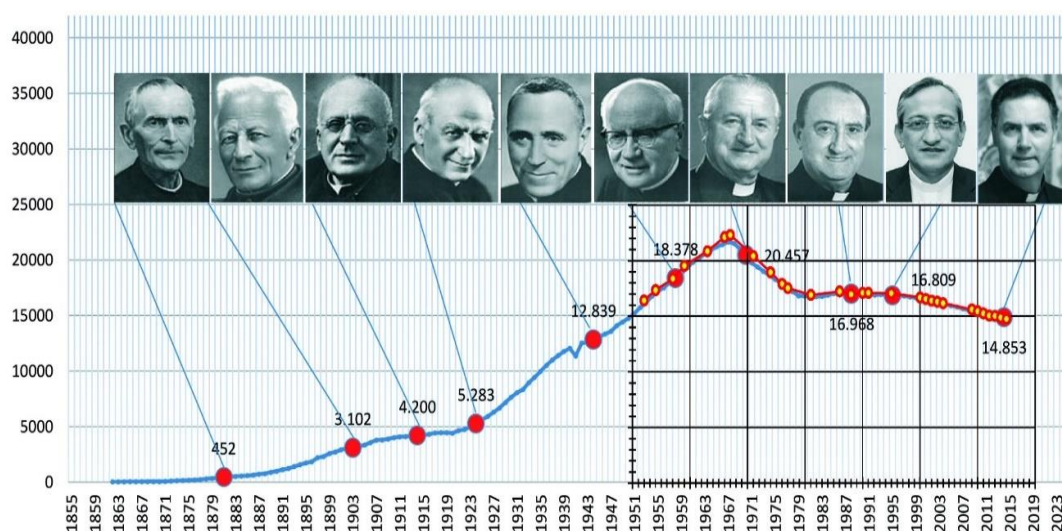


Figure 20: Comparison Data concerning the Salesians of Don Bosco [1], [20]

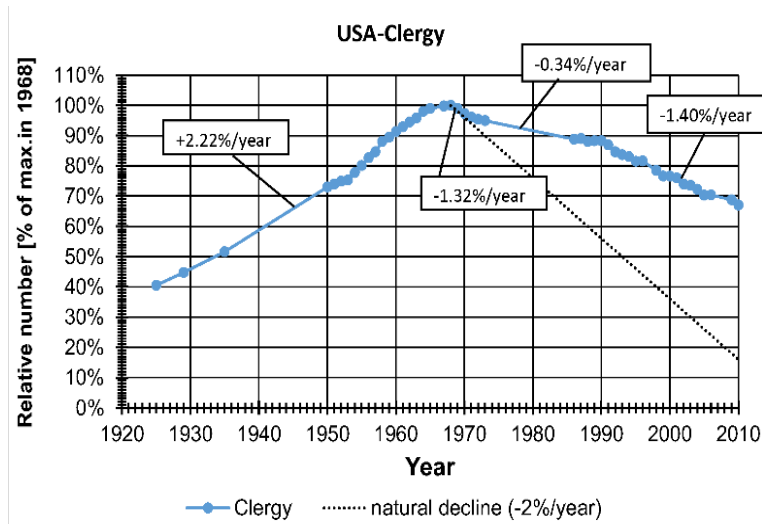


Figure 21: Number of clergy in USA [5]

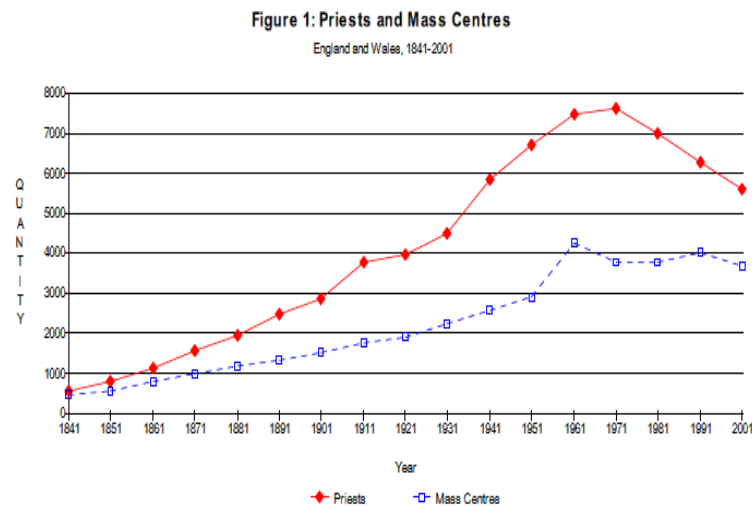


Figure 22: Number of Clergy in England and Wales [25]

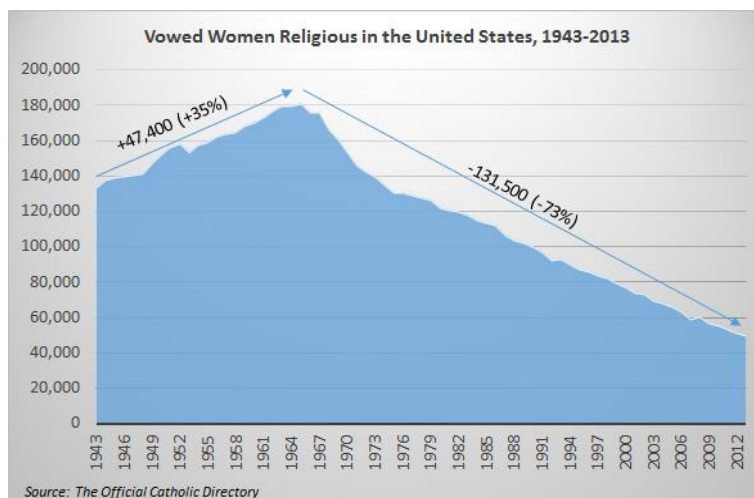


Figure 23: Religious Sisters in US (1943-2012)

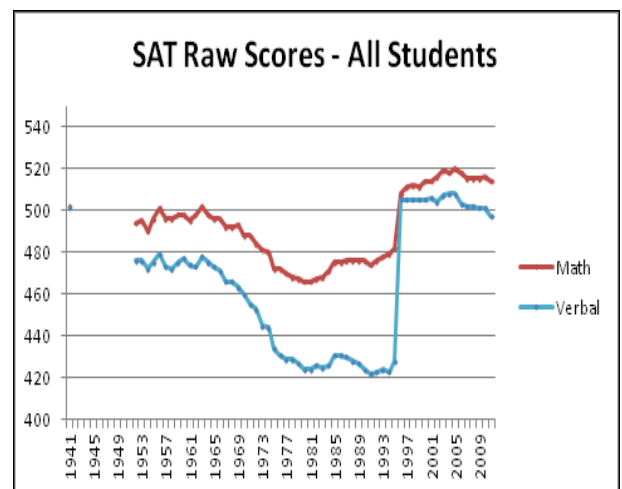


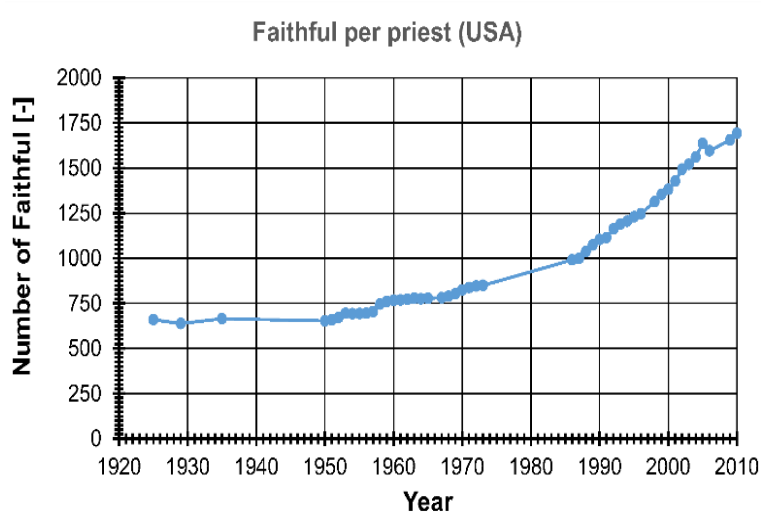
Figure 24: Declining SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) Scores in the US [28]

## 6.2 Consequences

In 1965 the number of Jesuits reached its highest point after over a century of uninterrupted steady growth. Since then it has declined to about 47.5% of what it was at the highest point. (Figures 18 and 19). A simple linear extrapolation indicates that if they continue on their tragic trajectory, they will cease to exist by 2070. Meanwhile they are spreading their version of “Catholic” to unsuspecting faithful. It is difficult to see how they could possibly be doing anything of value to the Church if we are to take the words of St. Mathew at face value: *“By their fruits you will know them.”*

Although this study deals primarily with male religious, it is important to observe from the timeline of the number of religious sisters in the USA (Figure 23) the same trend previously seen in the decline among the male religious. The importance of this observation is that it leaves no doubt as to the universality of the crisis and the point at which it began. Consider Figure 24 in which we see a steady decline of the average Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores in the USA, [28] starting at approximately the same time as the decline of religious institutes, both male and female. When one recalls the intense involvement of sisters working in the inner cities (as well as the male religious) this decline should come as no surprise. When the religious abandoned their stations in life, the SAT scores began to decline. It is not unreasonable to speculate on the correlation of declining SAT scores and the decline of male and female religious that ran educational institutes. The consequences of the loss of the teaching orders is beyond comprehension; without the Catholic schools to keep the standards high and to provide for children from poor families, education throughout the entire population has suffered. “Catholic” schools are still available, but only the wealthy can afford them, and many of them are Catholic in name only. (Note: This decline of SAT scores eventually resulted in the necessity to recalibrate the scores to reset the average to about 500; hence the spike in the scores at approximately year 1995 in Figure 24.)

The data pertaining to the Dutch ordinations (Figure 2) as well as the number of clergy in England and Wales (Figure 22) do not show any continuing serious decline of religious membership after the First Vatican Council. The Salesians of Don Bosco (Figure 20) founded in 1859 showed a steady growth every year until 1966, from about zero in 1859 to 22,810 in 1966. This was an average growth of about 210 vocations a year. Across the board, sources show that prior to 1963 the growth of the number of clergy had been linear for many decades, coinciding with the growth of the number of faithful (Figures 4, 21 and 22). It would require a fantastic stretch of reason to conclude that this universal, tragic decline and loss of vocations is mere coincidence when it takes place immediately after an ecumenical council.



**Figure 25: Number of faithful per priest in USA [4]**

Defenders of the status quo may be inclined to point to the fact that in Africa and Asia the Church is not in decline. Although the total number of baptized Catholic faithful in the world (Figure 26) shows a continued growth, in 2014 an increase of about 75% over the 1970 level, even the observed stabilisation



of religious membership after 2000 is still in a relative decline. How, then, is the Church fulfilling its mission to bring the Gospel to all nations? (Matt 28:19, Mark 16:15)

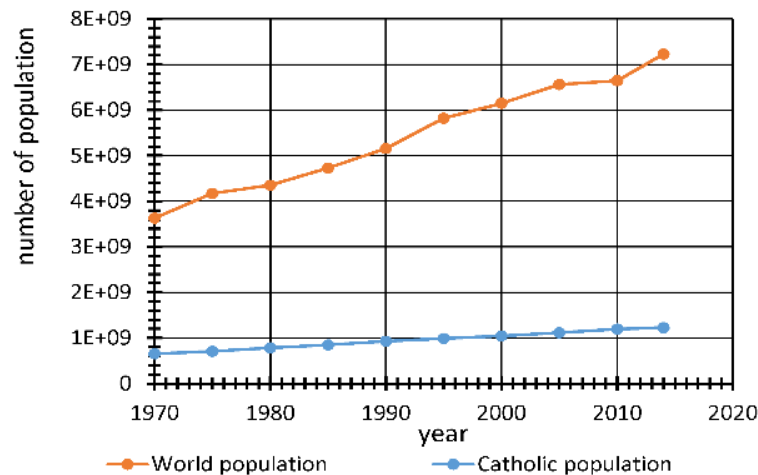


Figure 26: World Population and Baptized Catholics [3]

### 6.3 *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi*

Both authors assert that the liturgical crisis set the stage for the doctrinal crisis through the maxim of *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi* (the law of prayer determines the law of Faith). This timeless principle states that the mode of prayer leads to the seriousness, or lack of seriousness, of Faith. The opposite also holds true, *Lex Credendi, Lex Orandi* (the law of Faith determines the law of prayer) according to which the seriousness of Faith determines the manner of prayer. It is no great surprise, then, that the weakening of the universal prayers of the Church has been followed by a weakening of the seriousness of Faith. If not corrected, then, this weakened Faith seeks a further weakening of prayer in a process that leads to a vicious spiral that altogether can result in an eventual complete loss of Faith. On the other hand, to strengthen our prayers results in an increase in the seriousness of Faith. Liturgy governs Faith; this ancient principle, enshrined in the Catholic Catechism and held since the earliest days of Christianity is a basic understanding on which this work is founded.

General spiritual qualities that influence the vitality of religious institute and societies can be categorized:

1. Teaching and preaching in accordance with the *Depositum Fidei* (Deposit of Faith);
2. Living one's religious life as inspired by the *Depositum Fidei*;
3. The state of the liturgy within the religious institute;
4. The association of faithful from which vocations are found.

The first category involves a fundamental way in which the full Faith must be accepted as the law for any expression of Religious Life. The second one concerns the genuine, divinely inspired expression of the Religious Life that can never reject any expressions that have been inspired by the Holy Spirit. The third category involves, in a fundamental way the manner in which the Holy Mass is celebrated and daily prayers are offered as true expressions of the *Depositum Fidei* within the religious institutes and societies in accordance with the principle of *Lex Credendi, Lex Orandi*. The fourth and last category is the response by the faithful to the inspiration by the religious regarding the first three categories.

At this point we can ask, then: what do these religious congregations that are in decline have in common? More importantly, what do these religious congregations that are flourishing have in common? Although these questions should be answered through further study, any casual observer with any knowledge of some of the Category 7 institutes finds at least some degree of Pre-Vatican II Catholicism in their "Spiritual Qualities" as described above.

We hesitate to use the word “conservative” to describe the pre-conciliar period, or “liberal” to describe the post-conciliar period. These words represent human ideological constructs and have political meanings that vary from one country to the next. In the search for an appropriate term we find no alternative other than “traditional” to apply to those institutes that seem to still have a future. Do they obey the laws of their founders and preach and teach the gospel in accordance with what was handed down to them? Then they seem to have a future. Do they dress and comport themselves as their predecessors did? Then they seem to have a future. Do they pray as their predecessors did? Then they seem to have a future. In short, if their “Spiritual Qualities” are a continuation of the visions of their founders, and that of the Founder of our Faith, Jesus Christ, then they seem to have a future. Those institutes founded after 1967 were often founded in an attempt to resurrect the Spiritual Qualities that were lacking in larger, well-established (but dying) institutes. The authors welcome an alternative term, but for lack of a better one at the moment the word “traditional” seems to apply to those institutes that are not dying.

## 7 Conclusion

Considering the magnitude of the loss, one has to wonder: why is there such reluctance among so many of the prelates and Superiors of the Congregations to acknowledge the reason for which the decline began and then to respond accordingly? The ongoing decline does not only pertain to those religious congregations in severe decline; it affects the entire Church and all humanity. The loss of those religious who, for centuries worked in missions worldwide has handicapped the Church. The loss of orders that once ran hospitals and schools has left our inner cities violent and destitute. The superiors of those congregations that are in severe decline have a heavy responsibility in this, and will be called to account for it. They can either continue propagating this ongoing catastrophe or they can begin the process of recovery by returning to the original spirituality of their founders. The authors hope that this brief study will inspire further investigation into the subject. But more importantly, it is our hope that this study will inspire action by those responsible for leading the Church into the future. Those institutes which are thriving should be held up as models to be emulated. Those which are slowly dying and show no signs of recovery should be corrected on points of doctrine and liturgy, and if they refuse to conform they should be suppressed. The stakes are too high to simply ignore the ongoing catastrophe.

## References

---

- 1 'The Hierarchy of the Catholic Church' statistical data per institute; <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/>;
- 2 "Annuario Pontificio" (1960, 1961, 1962, 1965, 1967 and 1969); Typografia Poliglotta Vaticana.
- 3 'Agenzia Fides'. <http://www.fides.org/en/stats#.WEBYCa-V419>.
- 4 GCatholic.org (formerly Giga-Catholic Information) <http://www.gcatholic.org/about.htm>
- 5 'CARA, Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate'. <http://cara.georgetown.edu/frequently-request-ed-church-statistics/>.
- 6 "Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae 2001", L'Osservatore Romano (2001); <https://www.ewtn.com/library/chistory/annu2001.htm>.
- 7 "The changing demographics of Roman Catholics", Saenz (2005); Rogelio Population Reference Bureau, Washington DC
- 8 "Prospectives for Growth: A System Dynamics Study of the Roman Catholic Priest Population of the Netherlands". Oostveen J.P. and Sweeney D.J. (1986); International Conference of the System Dynamics Society, Seville, Spain, p1183.
- 9 "Statistical evaluation of the Roman Catholic Church in the Netherlands", Oostveen. J.P. (1997); <http://www.ecclesia-dei.nl/rkstat/index.html>.
- 10 "Index of Leading Catholic Indicators: The Church Since Vatican II", Kenneth C. Jones (2003); Oriens Publishing Company, St. Louis, Missouri, ISBN 10: 0972868801.
- 11 "Springtime Decay", David L. Sonnier (2004) on [www.seattlecatholic.com](http://www.seattlecatholic.com).
- 12 "Ecclesiastical Aggiornamento and Exponential Decay Functions: A Statistical Analysis" (2004), David L. Sonnier and Albert P. Marcello III. Presented at the 2004 Fourth Annual Faculty-Student International Conference in Honolulu. Hawaii, May 26-31 2004.
- 13 "The Priest Shortage: A Manufactured Crisis?", David L. Sonnier (2015); [www.christendomrestoration.org](http://www.christendomrestoration.org).
- 14 « La vérité des chiffres – les religieux en France, », (2016); <http://www.servianet.com/laveritedeschiffres/eglise/religieux.pdf>
- 15 "Irish Priestly Vocations in Worrying Decline", Catholic World Report (2012).
- 16 "US Catholics Face Shortage of Priests", Dave Breitenstein (2014); USA TODAY.
- 17 "The Catholic Church's priest shortage crisis: a self-inflicted wound", (2015); <https://www.life-sitenews.com/blogs/the-catholic-churchs-priest-shortage-crisis-a-self-inflicted-wound.html>;
- 18 "Risk analysis of Vatican IP", Oostveen. J.P. (2016); [http://www.ecclesiadei.nl/docs/risk\\_analysis.html](http://www.ecclesiadei.nl/docs/risk_analysis.html).
- 19 <http://nineteensixty-four.blogspot.nl/2011/02/changing-jesuit-geography.html>
- 20 <http://statisticsal.net/>
- 21 <http://www.salvatorians.com/about.html>
- 22 <http://congregationofmercy.org/apostolate.html>
- 23 <http://www.svdmissions.org/>
- 24 "Catholic Statistics, Priests and Population in England and Wales, 1841 – 2001", Dr Gareth Leyshon (2004); St John's Seminary, Womersley, GUILDFORD. GU5 0QX
- 26 *Summorum Pontificum* (2007) [https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2007/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_let\\_20070707\\_lettera-vescovi.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20070707_lettera-vescovi.html)
- 27 Decree Remitting Excommunication (*Latae Sententiae*) of the Bishops of the Society of Saint Pius X [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cbishops/documents/rc\\_con\\_cbishops\\_doc\\_20090121\\_remissione-scomunica\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cbishops/documents/rc_con_cbishops_doc_20090121_remissione-scomunica_en.html)
- 28 <http://www.erikthered.com/tutor/sat-act-history.html>