

“TRACKING PROGRESS” ECCLESIAL DOW JONES INDUSTRIAL AVERAGE

I have never tried to predict the **Stock Market**, especially given my aversion to taking risks with modest disposable income. But I am fascinated by how analysts scrutinize myriad data points while making recommendations about individual companies. Should we be doing the same in the Church? Tracking Church progress is tricky to do, for a variety of reasons. For centuries, the Church has diligently tried to set itself off from typical societal measurements of success or failure. There is scriptural basis for this approach, chief among them the words of St. Paul himself to the Corinthians: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth.” (1 Corinthians 3:6) We neither take credit, nor brag, and we do not gaze through the typical lens of market analysis. Still, I have increasingly questioned whether our approach has really been effective. I am convinced that noticing trends, tracking progress, and surveying the landscape is necessary to gauge how effective we are in the Church. I see little value in pretending everything is okay, when in fact, clearly it is not.

Consider Catholic school enrollment as an indicator of ecclesial health. For the 2016-17 academic year, Catholic school student enrollment across this nation was 1,878,824 (1,309,429 elementary, 569,395 in secondary schools). For comparative purposes, Catholic school enrollment stood just under 2.2 million in 2009, just eight years ago. At its peak, Catholic school enrollment stood at **5.2 million** in the **early 1960s**. The 1970s and 1980s saw a steep decline in both the number of schools and students. From the mid-1990s through 2000, there was a steady enrollment increase (1.3%) despite continued closings of schools. Then things started to change again, and quickly. The number of students declined by 409,384 (17.6%), mostly among elementary schools. In this Archdiocese, we have 25,895 students enrolled (18,542 elementary, 7,353 secondary), down -1.5% from last year. However, new pre-schools have emerged, adding 3,529 potential Kindergarten students in coming years.

It was an obvious trend as tuitions increased, in large part due to the changing demographics of the cost of running a school. Parishes built convents to accommodate 20 or more teaching sisters, each of whom had taken a vow of poverty. That “business model” became unsustainable when laity began replacing the dwindling number of religious. Catholic social teaching demands a living wage for teachers and administrators. This drastically affected the bottom line, but does not explain everything. If people had a bad experience in a Catholic school they were much less likely to send their own children to a parochial school, especially if that school was more expensive. People are incredulous when I tell them that my parents paid \$50 to send me to Nativity Grade School my first year. But they also had been cramming 50 kids in a classroom, a most unfair expectation for any teacher, religious or lay. They finally lowered classroom sizes as I began grade school and the tuitions rose steadily.

The total **number of priests** in the U.S. in 1965 stood at 58,632. Today it stands at 37,181. However, for a number of years, the **number of seminarians** was on the increase. Worldwide, the number of graduate-level seminarians grew significantly under Pope John Paul II, from 33,731 in 1980 to 58,538 in 2005, the year of his death. But that number has been trending downward in the past five years. So too **infant baptisms**—we have seen a **precipitous drop** from 806,138 in 2010 to 660,367 in 2017. That is extremely concerning! Weekly Mass attendance clocks in at 23%, **even up 1%** from 2000. One could infer that the **Catholic “base” is holding steady**, even while acknowledging the steep decline since I was born, when more than half of all Catholics attended Mass weekly. But like the DJIA, we look at much more recent trends for purposes of taking stock of our situation. (okay, pun intended!). The most glaring statistic is the **precipitous decline** of 50% since 1995 (down from 294,000 to 144,000) in the number of young adults seeking **marriage in the Church**. The Catholic population has not decreased, but sacramental practice has. These statistics are the fault lines that represent our greatest challenge.

Lately, I have been prayerfully considering my Catholic “market” predictions. While there is ample evidence to be bearish on the Church, I’m not ready to throw in the towel just yet. Did you know that the value of services provided by all the **Catholic Charities** agencies in this country totaled approximately \$3.12 billion during 2017? That is **double the amount of aid** in the past 20 years. The lay faithful appear to be interested in volunteering in their parishes and assisting those most in need. In this Archdiocese, we are seeing record numbers of laity applying for the Archbishop Flynn Catechetical Institute, steady seminary numbers and vital youth programs

such as NET's Lifeline and Steubenville Summer Conferences. This is why we try with a wonderful group such as **Cathedral Young Adults**, to provide an attractive forum in which our young adult Catholics can meet one another, enjoy fellowship, and yes, perhaps even find a future spouse!

When I see evidence that alumni of Catholic schools attend Mass at a far higher rate than their peers who never attended a Catholic school, I realize that there is clearly an impact. Last week, 8,000 college-age students attended a conference (I was proud to sponsor two of them) sponsored by the **Fellowship of Catholic University Students** (FOCUS) and they left even more fired up to spread the Gospel message. On Tuesday, dozens of young people will attend our 5:15 p.m. Mass and then board buses to drive all night to Washington DC for the 45th annual National March for Life. This gives me great hope— this is my reason to be bullish on our future.

- In the past year, approximately 3.2 million **displaced Iraqi's** have returned home, a sign of hope for the future. Many media outlets have been relatively quiet about the changes in Iraq, more content to cover North Korea or the Mueller investigation. Many of those who returned went back to the northern province of Nineveh— yes, **that** Nineveh, of biblical fame.
- The final Crashed Ice event takes place next Friday-Saturday. As has been our practice, the Friday 5:15 p.m. Mass will be **moved to 12:00 Noon**, and the **Saturday Mass will be at 4:00 p.m.**, preceded by confessions from 2:30-3:30 p.m.
- The rich get richer. With **Alabama's** come from behind victory over Georgia, the Crimson Tide are the most dominant collegiate team in a generation. They have 46 former players currently in the NFL. Did you know that the school reported \$103.9 million in revenue last year, representing \$47 million in profit? Alabama also boasts a very strong graduation rate. But let's not kid ourselves— Division I football is a mega-business.
- We are hosting an ecumenical **Lutheran-Catholic Vespers** at which Archbishop Hebda will preside on Sunday January 21 at 7:00 p.m., in observance of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The National Lutheran Choir will sing. A reception will follow in Hayden Hall.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector