

# Revealing the 'taboo' of retirement for Catholic priests; declining population, burnout

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There are 66.6 million parish-connected Catholics in the US. While the number of Catholic parishes has remained rather steady over the past 50 years (17,637 in 1965 vs. 17,483 in 2014), there has been a steady decline in the number of priests and men seeking ordination. Credit: Florida Atlantic University

You've heard about physician shortages and physician burnout. But, Catholic priests? According to a researcher at Florida Atlantic

University, Catholic priests in the United States are in a similar predicament with even fewer options or opportunities to retire from their diocese. And, unlike medicine, priesthood is not a lucrative profession.

There are 66.6 million parish-connected Catholics in the U.S. While the number of Catholic parishes has remained rather steady over the past 50 years (17,637 in 1965 vs. 17,483 in 2014), there has been a steady decline in the number of [priests](#) and men seeking ordination. In 1965, there were 58,632 priests in the U.S. with 94 percent of them in active ministry; in 2014, there were 38,275 priests with only 68 percent in active ministry. In 2009, the average age of a priest was 63, whereas the average age in 1970 was 35. By 2019, half of all active priests will be at the minimum [retirement](#) age of 70.

"There is little research about priests and retirement, and there is the impression that priesthood is a vocation from which there can be no retirement," said Michael N. Kane, Ph.D., a professor in the School of Social Work in FAU's College for Design and Social Inquiry, and author of "The Taboo of Retirement for Diocesan Catholic Priests," published in the *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling*. "The expectation is that the priest will continue to be of service throughout his life until he is physically or cognitively unable to serve. To do otherwise may be perceived as self-indulgent or selfish. But after decades of service is it reasonable for a priest to say 'enough!'?"

Kane found that priest-respondents were not only concerned with the financial possibilities of retirement, but were equally concerned that they would not have the option to retire because of the shortage of priests in the U.S.

"There appears to be an unspoken organizational need that priests should continue in ministry, especially smaller dioceses where there are serious

shortages of priests," said Kane. "Even larger dioceses will begin to feel this pressure as more priests reach the minimum age requirement in the next five years."

The choice to retire for workers in secular organizations is based on health, finances and other factors. While most individuals over the age of 65 remain employed by need rather than by choice for economic reasons, retirement for priests is rather complex.

Retirement policies in many dioceses require a minimum age of 70, a specific number of years in ministry, and the permission of the bishop. Other dioceses hold to the above policies with full retirement only possible at age 75. In prior research, Kane found that some priests had reached ages beyond 70 and were not allowed to retire. There also are aspects of church governance that are guided by flexible practices and procedures that offer latitude and discretion in decision-making.

"In many areas, bishops have the power to strictly or loosely apply rules, protocols and other criteria. Retirement is one such area," said Kane. "There is great diversity and disparity in diocesan benefit plans as there is no consistent standard applied for priests' retirement."

A national survey of diocesan financial plans for retirement found more than half of the retirement plans for priests in the U.S. were substantially underfunded. The reasons for underfunding pension plans include the unwillingness of dioceses to adequately fund these retirement plans, financial mismanagement, and maintaining these funds as a part of the diocesan structure and therefore subject for use in the settlement of lawsuits. These issues raise concerns for the possibility of retirement for aging priests in many dioceses.

"Compounding the apparent shortage of priests and their increased work demands have been the scandals that rocked the U.S. Catholic

community beginning in 2002, and as a result, there has been a change in relationships between priests and bishops, with some describing them as less trusting, strained, and even stressful," said Kane.

Because of the decline in the number of priests, their strained relationships with superiors, and the continuing demand for ministerial services among the large Catholic population, priests experience mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety, and burnout related to their lifestyle. Some literature suggests that priests have rates of depression and anxiety up to seven times higher than the general population.

"These days, the bishop has the power to retain the priests he desperately needs," said Kane. "Of course, the priest may way walk away from the ministry, but he will probably do so with no financial support or benefit package - even after several decades of service."

Provided by Florida Atlantic University

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