

The Reasons behind Beacons of Light

Brad Bursa, our director of evangelization, once told me he was talking to a priest from the Diocese of Toledo about parish consolidations and the shifting landscape. The priest told Brad that he wasn't so concerned about a priest shortage as he was about a people shortage. "Will there be any people in the pews for the priests to serve?" That was his question. And this gets at a hard truth, and one that hits home as we continue in the Beacons of Light process in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati: Beacons does not have to do so much with a declining number of priests as it does with a declining number of Catholics.

I'm sure many of you are acquainted with the statistics, which give us a glimpse of the landscape, even if they don't tell the whole story. A 2024 Pew Research Center study found that only 19% of Americans self-identify as Catholic, down from 24% in 2007. This is a 20% decrease. For every 100 new Catholics, 840 existing Catholics leave. Where are they going? Well, a majority begin to identify as "nones" (no longer affiliating with a religion), and a third become Protestant. Roughly 13% of U.S. adults are formerly Catholic, meaning they were raised Catholic but no longer identify with the religion. In the Archdiocese, 44 of the 57 Families of Parishes had lower Mass attendance in 2024 than they did prior to COVID.

On top of this, we know about divorce rates in our country. We know young people aren't getting married as young as they used to, if they are getting married at all. We know the birth rate in the US hit an all-time low in 2024, with fewer than 1.6 children being born per woman. In fact, the Archdiocese recently published data reporting 2,926 weddings across the Archdiocese in 1999. In 2024, that number was 1,207. That's nearly a 60% decrease.

To give a snapshot of our Family, taken as a whole back in 2014, we averaged 2,329 people attending Mass on a weekend. By 2019 (pre-COVID), that number had already dropped to 1,884. It bottomed out in 2020 at 968. In 2021, we rebounded up to 1,285, but have essentially been a flat line the last few years, coming in at 1,301 in 2024. Overall, our Mass attendance has been trending at a 44% decrease over ten years across the four parishes. Unfortunately, our path seems to travel roughly the same trend line as the rest of the country, according to a Gallup poll.

During roughly that same time period, our religious education programs dropped from around 225 families to 49 families in 2024. That's a 78% decrease. Additionally, when our Family of Parishes took the Disciple Maker Index back in 2022, of the 485 respondents, roughly 50% were 66 and older, and a whopping 75% were 56 and older. These staggering numbers indicate a rapidly aging core group of parishioners.

Over and over, I hear the lament and concern of many parishioners whose children and grandchildren do not practice their Catholic faith. It's an epidemic, it seems. Recently, I read the following in *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission*, and I think it captures much of what I hear:

How often parents of a certain age mourn the loss of their children to the Faith without knowing how or why it happened. "We sent them to Catholic schools; we took them to Mass. We did everything our own parents did! What went wrong?" A way of living Catholic family life...[became] sadly inadequate to compete with the overpowering [cultural] atmosphere that their children inhabit. (44-45)

Embracing our mission as Catholics in this age will require proactive adjustments on our part. Some institutions, programs, and structures that served us well in the past have run their course. The statistics indicate as much, along with your personal anecdotes. And this brings us back to Beacons of Light. Beacons is our local Church's response to the Catholic Church's new cultural positioning as a minority movement. It is coming to grips with the hard truths of reality, namely, that, as the Beacons materials say, "our resources have often been largely consumed by efforts to maintain the status quo and are spread too thin to be truly effective." I'm a sports fan, and I know organizations go through phases of growth and success. They also have times when they have to "rebuild" in order to grow and achieve their goals. Beacons is a kind of rebuilding phase, and this means Beacons is ultimately about growth. It is a process of pastoral planning to best arrange our resources to evangelize and make disciples right now — in these times — and into the foreseeable future.

The good news is, more and more people within our Family of Parishes are embracing this reality and working together. With everything we have going on across the Family, we are experiencing Beacons of Light rather than merely talking about it. We are moving and growing, we are trying new things and learning a lot about how to be a united family of Catholics in our area. Throughout 2026, I will be sharing about different facets of the Beacons landscape, like organization, schools, adult and youth evangelization, liturgy, service, finances, and so forth. I'll give updates on our progress in these areas and indicate the path forward — a path I'm excited to traverse with all of you.



Fr. Tim Ralston
Pastor of Stella Maris