

## Vital Statistics

For the last fifteen years, since 1984, the January issue of *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, a journal published quarterly out of the Overseas Ministries Study Center in New Haven, Connecticut, has included a feature called the “Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission” (Barrett and Johnson, 24–5). Up until 1998 the feature was authored by mission statistician David B. Barrett; last year and this year Barrett has been joined by researcher Todd M. Johnson. The focus of the feature is unabashedly evangelistic, in a way that would appeal more to Evangelical Protestants than to most Catholics. Nevertheless, on just two pages Barrett and Johnson provide an amazing array of statistics that in my judgment can prove useful and helpful to a Catholic readership, particularly those engaged in full-time ministry. Such “vital statistics” are indeed “signs of the times.”

The statistical table that Barrett and Johnson provide for this current year shows 1999 in the context of the last century and the first twenty-five years of the new millennium. For example, the table shows that the world population in 1900 was a little over 1.5 billion people. By 1970 it had doubled to 3.7 billion, and at 6.1 billion in 1999 has almost doubled again. By next year, the authors say, the world’s population is projected to be 6.9 billion, and by 2025 it will have reached nearly 8.4 billion women, men, and children. Another interesting trend is the explosive growth in the population of people in cities as compared with a relatively stable or at least steady growth of rural dwellers. In 1900 only 232,694,900 people lived in all the world’s cities, a mere fraction of the world’s population at the time. Today over one third of humanity—2.8 billion out of a population of 6 billion—lives in an urban context. In the next quarter century the urban population could be nearly 5 billion (4,736,200,000), nearly one half of the projected world population of some 8 billion. The rural population, however, began the twentieth century with 1.3 billion, increased to only 3.1 billion by 1999, and will only number an estimated 3.3 billion in 2025.

In a similar vein, it is quite fascinating to see what can only be called an explosion of humanity in the world’s urban centers. In the first seventy years of the twentieth century the number of cities with a population of over 100,000 increased 700 percent, from 300 in 1900 to 2,400 in 1970! Since 1970 that number has nearly doubled (to 4,040) and will continue to grow to an estimated 6,500 by the year 2025. At the same

time, what the authors call “megacities” of over 1 million inhabitants have increased from 20 at the turn of the century to 161 in 1970 and to 405 today. In twenty-five years there will be 650 cities in the world with a population of over 1 million. Barrett and Johnson reveal the reason such statistics might be particularly important for the Church. They have calculated that if the urban poor numbered 100 million at the turn of the century, twenty-five years into the next century that number will have grown to some 3 billion; and today there are almost two-thirds that number of people who live in poverty in our cities: just over 1.9 billion. Those who are not only poor but who live in the squalid slums, favelas, and barrios of cities like Rio, Manila, Mexico City, Ibadan, and Chicago increased some 1200 percent between 1900 and 1970, from 20 million to 260 million; today that number is 1.3 billion, and is projected to increase to 2.1 billion in twenty-five years.

After listing these startling and often grim statistics, and before focusing on figures that would be of interest mainly to Evangelicals (e.g., numbers of missionaries, number of hours of evangelism per year [463 trillion in 1999!], per capita disciple-making opportunities), Barrett and Johnson provide some important statistics about the world’s religions. In 1900, they say, Christians of all kinds numbered some 558 million, or 34.4 percent of the world’s population. Today Christians number 1.9 billion, but comprise only 33.1 percent of humanity. By the next quarter-century there will be 2.7 billion Christians, representing 33.7 percent of the world’s inhabitants. In contrast, while Muslims numbered only 200 million at the dawn of our present century, they have increased to 1.1 billion today and will be almost 2 billion strong by 2025. We can only provide a glance at the development of other religions over the last century and into the next: There were 203 million Hindus in 1900, there are 774 million today, and there will be just over 1 billion in 2025; Buddhists claimed 127 million adherents at the turn of this century, and now claim 358 million at century’s end. There were 12 million Jews a century ago; now, after the Holocaust, there are 14 million. Today there are just a little over 1 billion Roman Catholics in the world, in contrast to 266 million a century ago. There are 461 million Protestants worldwide, compared to 103 million in 1900. Our Orthodox brothers and sisters numbered 115 million when this century began; now they number 271 million.

The statistical table is also a way of seeing the growth of what Karl Rahner famously called the “World Church,” or what Walbert Bühlmann dubbed the “Third Church.” One hundred years ago there were 8.7 million African Christians; by 1970 that number had multiplied to a dazzling 120 million, only to be superseded today by an even more amazing 333 million! But wait—Barrett and Johnson project that in twenty-five years African Christians will have doubled yet again to 668

million! Asia had 20 million Christians in 1900, 94 million in 1970, and has 295 million today, with a projection of 453 million in twenty-five years. Latin America (now the largest Catholic continent) started the century with 60 million Christians and will end it with some 463 million. By 2025 that number will increase by almost 200 million. In contrast, Barrett and Johnson show that the Christian of the “north”—Europe and North America—has and will remain relatively stabilized. This is due, I would think, to the fact that the population in the north will not grow at the same rapid rate that it will in other parts of the world; it is also due to the fact that these areas are no longer as overwhelmingly Christian as they were in times past. Europe started the twentieth century with 368 million Christians; it will end the century with 536,403,000. But it is projected that in twenty-five years the Christian European population will decline ever so slightly to 536,144,000. North American Christians numbered some 59 million one hundred years ago, and are now counted as just above 224 million. By 2025 we will have grown to a population of 264 million. There seems to be no doubt that the torch has been passed, at least in terms of numbers of Christians. What this will mean for church leadership, the development of a plurality of theologies in non-Western local churches, and the allocation of resources will be major questions both here in the United States and in other parts of the world, I would imagine, for quite a few of the coming decades of the next century.

That the world is far along in the process of globalization is an uncontested fact, but a few statistics that the authors offer in the short introduction to their table shed particularly interesting light on the technological revolution taking us to places not even Jules Verne dreamed of. For every one thousand people, say Barrett and Johnson, there are, “on average, 342 radios, 220 televisions, 118 telephones, 10 fax machines and 81 computers” (24). In 1998 the first satellite system for cellular phone use was completed. The authors admit that its use will be initially quite expensive, but “in the near future it will be possible for one to telephone no matter where one is on the planet” (24).

Barrett and Johnson provide much, much more information in their two-page article than I can possibly include in this short summary of their important work. It might be worth looking at the article itself and spending some time pondering the overwhelming sets of numbers they set before their readers. Of course, there are areas that they have not surveyed that I would have liked to see—statistics on the world’s refugees, immigration, religious vocations, candidates for the priesthood, martyrs and persecuted Christians in today’s world. Perhaps some of these areas are where Catholic statisticians might want to direct some of their research. Nevertheless, Barrett and Johnson have once more presented an array of vital statistics, numbers that are more

than numbers. They show trends we need to recognize as we live in a world that is rapidly becoming very different from the world in which many of us came to maturity. It is the only world, however, that young people know. I believe strongly that we need to do our theology, work out our spirituality, and plan our strategies of evangelization in serious and respectful dialogue with these "signs of the times."

#### REFERENCE

- Barrett, David B., and Todd M. Johnson. "Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission: 1999." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 23 (January 1999) 24-5.

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