

Catholic Statistics - 2011 Update

Priests and Population in England and Wales, 1841 - 2011

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Abstract: This paper presents tables and graphs for the number of Catholic clergy and Mass Centres in England and Wales 1841-2011 and the total Catholic population 1901-2011 of England and Wales, based on figures published in the *Catholic Directory* over this timespan. The figures are also normed against the total (all faiths) population of the province.

Key words: *Catholic population; England and Wales; clergy; priests; Mass centres; census; Catholic Directory.*

In 2004 I produced a paper¹ following the publication of the 2001 UK National Census, which provided an opportunity to compare the Catholic population of England and Wales with the total population. Using figures available in the *Catholic Directory* published every year, originally by private companies and later by the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, it was possible to consider the Catholic population throughout the 20th Century. The *Directory* also made it possible to consider trends for the number of clergy and Mass centres back through much of the 19th Century. This new paper is an update in the light of results from the UK Census of 2011.

We can presume that the *Directory's* figures for total numbers of priests (secular and religious combined) and total number of Mass centres (both parish churches and other chapels) should be fairly accurate, deriving from official sources. Figures available since 1901 concerning the number of Catholics present in the province of England & Wales constitute "softer" data. Gordon Heald² has noted how these figures are based on estimates supplied by parish clergy, which vary enormously in particular parishes but when pooled give a steady indication nationally. His article³ presents statistics for Mass attendance and reception of various sacraments from 1944 to 1998, which I do not reproduce in this paper.

¹ <http://www.garethleyshon.info/CathStat.pdf>

² *The Tablet*, 19th June, 1999, p. 863.

³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 860-863.

For our present purposes I have taken data from the *Directory* at 10-yearly intervals starting in 1841 (the 1831 *Directory* gave no compiled statistics), choosing the decennial year to correspond to that of the British National Census. In some cases I have had to make a linear interpolation of missing data points; details of the sources of the data are appended in Table I. Data for the UK National Population, based on Census figures, is sourced from a table compiled by Seattle Community College.⁴

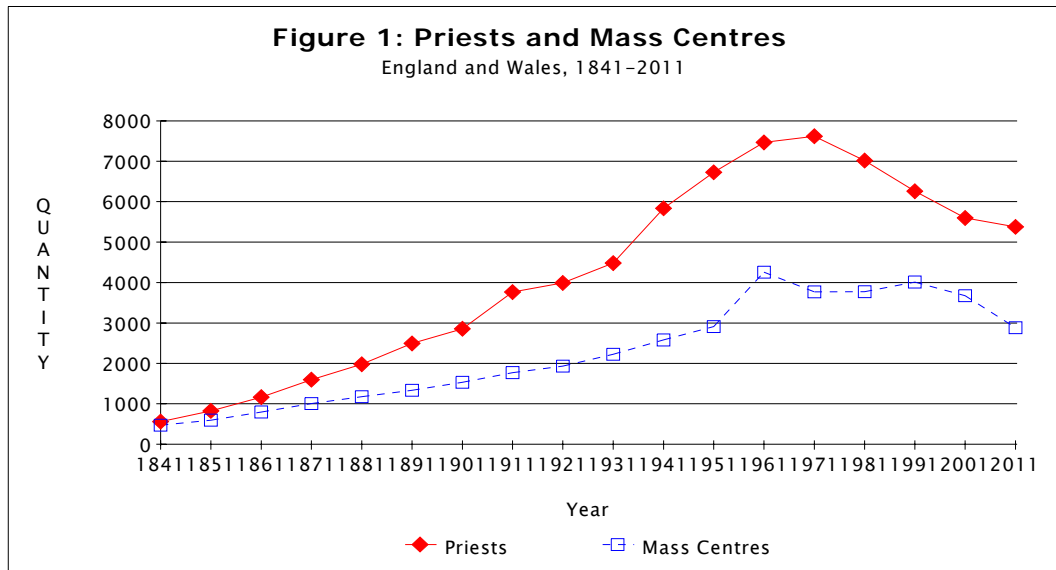


Figure 1 and Table II show the listed numbers of priests and Mass centres from 1841 to the present day. In the decade leading up to the 1850 restoration of the hierarchy, the Church in England and Wales grew by 265 extra priests and 123 mass centres. The slope of the graphs indicates that the growth then accelerated slightly and continued steadily at its new rate up to 1901. During the 20th Century, the number of vocations grew even more rapidly until numbers levelled off in the 1960s.

The figures shown include retired clergy, so a graph of "active clergy", including all new vocations, would peak and fall somewhat earlier. Post-World War II population expansion seems to have triggered a major expansion of Mass Centres, which have remained fairly stable in number from the mid 1960s until the mid-1990s. More recently there has been a significant drop in the number of locations used to celebrate Mass.

⁴ <http://www.seattlecentral.org/qelp/sets/007/007.html>

The Catholic Directory did not include statistics for the estimated number of Catholic laity until the start of the 20th Century, so it is only possible to norm the numbers of priests against the total Catholic population (not necessarily practising, but known to the clergy returning figures) from 1901. Table III gives the population data from 1901 to 2011.

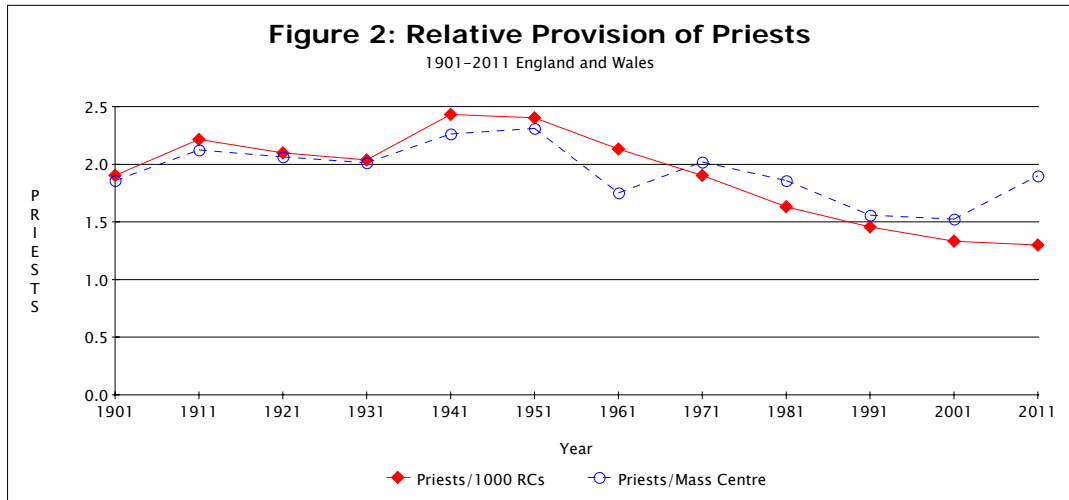
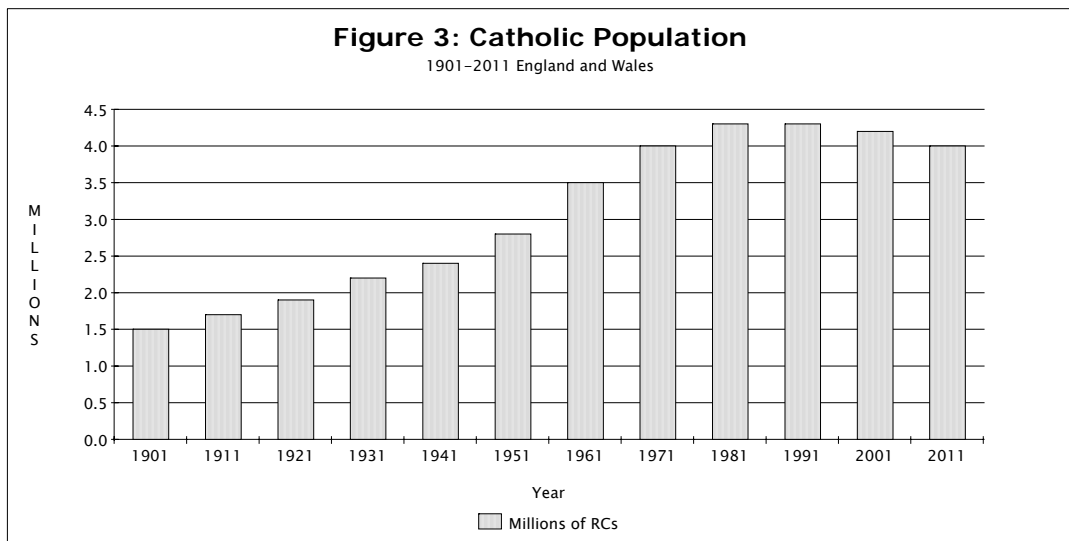


Figure 2 shows both the number of priests per thousand Catholics, and the number of priests per Mass Centre. 1931-1961 was a boom period with the Church being particularly well supplied. In the last decade, since the number of Mass centres (i.e. churches plus other Sunday venues) has dropped without a corresponding decrease in the number of clergy, the *ratio* of priests to Mass centres is as strong as it was in 1971 or 1901-1931. Part of the reason that clergy numbers have not fallen in recent years is the significant influx of ex-Anglican clergy ordained as Catholic priests around 1996-1997 following the decision of the Church of England to ordain women as priests in 1992.⁵ It should be noted, however, that many of these new ex-Anglican Catholic priests have been assigned to chaplaincy rather than parish roles, so the effective ratio of working priests to Mass centres will not benefit by the full effect of this influx.

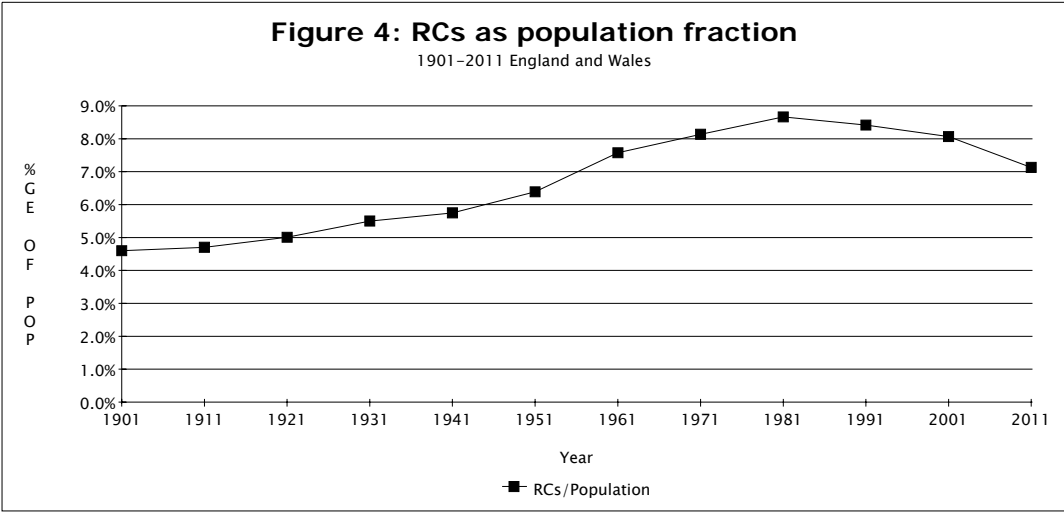
⁵ <http://www.ukvocation.org/statistics-the-priestly-vocations-in-england-and-wales/>



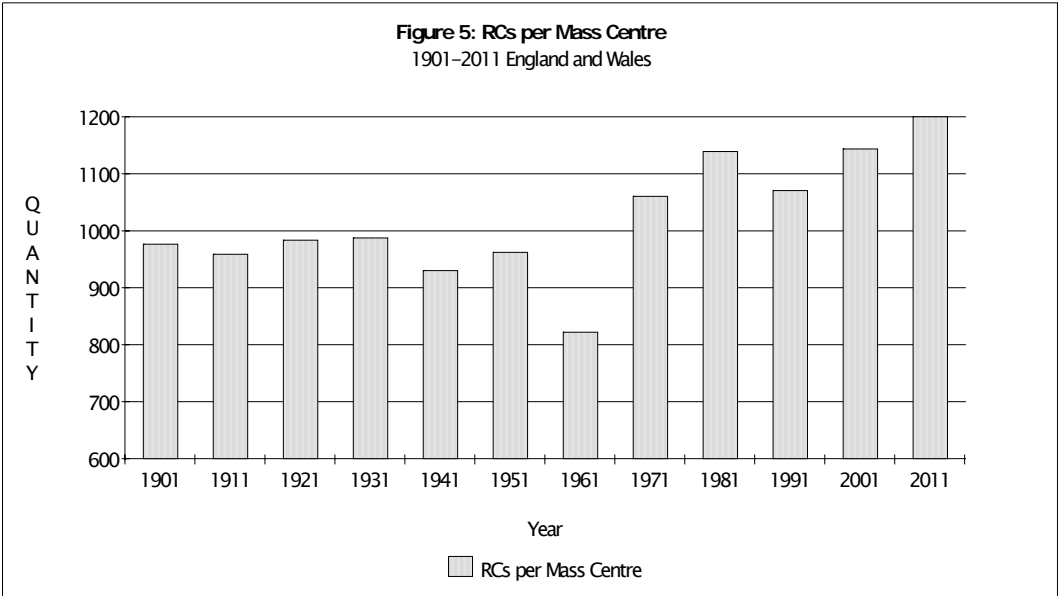
As for the Catholic population itself, Figure 3 shows the actual numbers: again, the rate of growth increased after World War II, but the population seems to have plateaued or begun to decrease since 1981. Some time between November 2012 and February 2013, the UK Office of National Statistics intends to release figures for religious affiliation indicated in the 2011 Census.⁶ For England and Wales, however, the 2011 Census will ask the same question as in 2001, where a single catch-all category of “Christian” will aggregate Catholics and other Christians. The UK Census will not reveal a figure for the number of self-identifying Catholics which could be compared with the Church’s own estimate. (In Scotland, there were distinct categories for Catholics and the Church of Scotland in the 2001 Census, and Northern Ireland has collected denominational data since 1861.)⁷

⁶ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/census/2011/census-data/2011-census-prospectus/release-plans-for-2011-census-statistics/second-release-of-2011-census-statistics/index.html>

⁷ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/census/2011/the-2011-census/2011-census-questionnaire-content/final-recommended-questions-2011---religion.pdf>



Reckoned as a fraction of the total population of England and Wales, Figure 4 shows that the first half of the century saw a gentle rise from 5% to 6%, followed by a post-war boom, ultimately peaking at 8.7% in 1981 and declining since then. Finally, Figure 5 shows how the number of Catholics served by a Mass Centre has been above the 1000 mark since 1971 (note the Y-axis starts at 600). In 2001, I noted that the figures might be stabilising; now we might see the beginning of an upward trend due to the closure of Mass centres; but it would be premature to make definite predictions.



Overall Summary

In 2011, most measures continue to show a decline in Catholic presence in England and Wales, whether considered “internally” (tally of priests and Mass Centres) or "externally" (Catholics in the national population).

The significant closure of Mass centres in the last decade has caused the provision of priests per Mass centre to improve significantly, though the number of (nominal) Catholics served by that Mass centre has also increased.

Based on my own pastoral experience I would identify the main driver of the fall in the number of Mass venues as the difficulty of dwindling congregations being able to finance the maintenance of their buildings, over and above the difficulty of providing clergy to continue religious services - but this would require more solid research to establish firmly.

This paper is made available in order to make the statistics accessible rather than to provide any deeper analysis. Further study would be needed to ascertain the relative contributions of factors causing population change: lapsation of adults; trends in the number of children borne to Catholic parents; failure to baptise children; reception of converts. The data presented here merely forms a snapshot of Catholic practice (in terms of worshippers, buildings, and clergy) insofar as the statistics are available.

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Table I: Sources of Statistical Data

The *Catholic Directory for England and Wales* has been published by different London-based companies over the time period studied here, and has changed the format in which the statistical data is presented. The following table gives the page references from which the data has been obtained to produce Tables II and III, and hence plot the graphs presented in this essay.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Publisher</u>	<u>Clergy</u>	<u>Centres</u>	<u>RCs</u>
1841	R	69	68	-
1851	R	108	107	-
1861	R	xiv	xiv	-
1871	B&O	296	296	-
1881	B&O	314	314	-
1891	B&O	268	268	-
1901	B&O	416	416	68 ^E
1911	B&O	591	591	55 ^S
1921	B&O	571	571	572
1931 ^a	B&O	576	576	576
1941	B&O	700	700	700
1951	B&O	579	579	579
1961	B&O	727	727	727
1971 ^v	B&O/U	z	z	z
1981	U	667	667	667
1991	G	523	523	523
2001	G	928	930	930
2011 ^c	G	z	z	z

Key:

Year - cover date of the Directory. The actual statistics will be one or two years old.

Publisher - firm publishing that Directory: R = private publication; B&O = Burns & Oates; U = Universe Publishing; G = Gabriel Communications.

Clergy - page reference for table of number of priests

Centres - page reference for table of number of Mass centres (= churches plus other chapels plus borrowed venues)

RCs - page reference for estimated Catholic population

Notes to Table I

- a. From 1931, separate figures were given for regular and secular clergy. I have aggregated the figures.
- c. Due to a printing error in the 2011 Catholic Directory, which caused the statistics pages not to be included in the available copies, I have linearly interpolated figures from the directories for 2010 (pages 887-888) and 2012 (page 863-864).
- E. Although the tabulated data refers to “England” alone it is presumed to include Wales implicitly.
- S. The tabulated data is aggregated with figures for Scotland; a figure for England has been interpolated from neighbouring entries in the table.
- v. Data for 1971 has been interpolated from the 1970 (pub. B&O, p. 803) and 1973 (pub. U, p. 808) volumes. No 1971 directory was produced because of the change of publishers.
- z. Figures have been interpolated from neighbouring years.

Note on systematic errors: The delay in passing figures to the compilers may vary from diocese to diocese, preventing a figure from being a precise snapshot of a particular year; nevertheless, these inconsistencies should be small enough that we will still be able to see clear trends in the data. The figures for the number of Catholics is most prone to error, being quoted only to the nearest 0.1 million.

Table II: Priests and Mass Centres 1841 - 2001

Year	Priests	Mass Ctrs
1841	561	474
1851	826	597
1861	1165	798
1871	1551	947
1881	1979	1175
1891	2494	1335
1901	2856	1536
1911	3766	1773
1921	3989	1932
1931	4484	2228
1941	5839	2580
1951	6728	2910
1961	7465	4258
1971	7618	3772
1981	7016	3775
1991	6261	4016
2001	5600	3673
2011	5379	2882

Table III: Catholic Population, Priests and Mass Centres 1901 - 2001

RCs	E&W Pop	Clergy	Mass Ctrs	RC/Pop
1.5	32.612	2856	1536	4.6%
1.7	36.136	3766	1773	4.7%
1.9	37.932	3989	1932	5.0%
2.2	39.988	4484	2228	5.5%
2.4	41.748	5839	2580	5.7%
2.8	43.815	6728	2910	6.4%
3.5	46.196	7465	4258	7.6%
4.0	49.152	7618	3772	8.1%
4.3	49.634	7016	3775	8.7%
4.3	51.099	6261	4016	8.4%
4.2	52.085	5600	3673	8.1%
4.0	56.101	5379	2882	7.1%

Figures for RCs and E&W Pop are in millions.