

## GLOBAL AND REGIONAL ENROLLMENT TRENDS IN CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION: 1975-2018



Analytics series

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### KEY MESSAGES:

- Globally, in 2018, 6.5 million students were enrolled in Catholic institutions of higher education. This includes 2.3 million students in (non-university) higher institutes, 0.5 million students in ecclesiastical studies at the university level, and 3.7 million students in other types of university studies.
- Enrollment in Catholic higher education more than doubled between 1975 and 2018. Despite higher growth rates in Africa, most of the growth in absolute terms was concentrated in the Americas, Asia, and Europe as enrollment remains highly concentrated in high and middle income countries.

### Introduction

Globally, the Catholic Church estimates that in 2018, 6.5 million students were enrolled in Catholic institutions of higher education. This includes 2.3 million students in higher institutes, 0.5 million students in ecclesiastical studies at the university level, and 3.7 million students in other types of university studies (Secretaria Status, 2020). How has enrollment in Catholic institutions of higher education evolved over time? Does enrollment remain concentrated in few high income countries, or is it increasing in the global south? In which region is enrollment the largest and where is it growing fastest? How is enrollment split between universities and other institutions of higher education, and by types of studies within universities (ecclesiastical and other studies)?

To answer these questions, this note provides trends in enrollment in Catholic institutions of higher education from 1975 to 2018 and discusses some of the implications for the future of these institutions. The note updates with the most recent data available analysis published previously in two papers (Wodon, 2019, 2020a)<sup>1</sup>. A separate note in this series considers global and regional trends in enrollment in K12 Catholic schools.

### Box 1: Knowledge Notes

**What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website?** The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

**Which topics are covered in the Knowledge Notes Series?** The series explores achievements and challenges for Catholic schools globally, including in terms of enrollment, reach to the poor, academic performance, parental priorities, costs and affordability, and religious education. Interesting innovations are also featured.

**What is the focus of this note?** The note looks at trends in enrollment in Catholic institutions of higher education globally and by region. Growth rates have been strong over the last few decades in Africa but from a low base. In absolute terms, most of the gains in enrollment over time have been observed in the Americas, Asia and Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> The analysis in those papers was shortened for this note.

## Background

It is often argued that Catholic institutions of higher education provide special benefits to students and broader society. First, there is a perception that the education provided in Catholic institutions at both the K12 level and higher is of good quality, and possibly better on average than in other institutions. Second, while welcoming students from all religious backgrounds, Catholic institutions pride themselves in providing an education that is grounded in the Catholic faith and that emphasizes moral values. The question of Catholic identity or “What makes us different?” is often the focus of debates in scholarly work on Catholic education. At the same time, Catholic institutions are not immune to broader challenges faced by all institutions of higher learning, whether Catholic or not. There could even be a risk of focusing too much on issues related to Catholic identity at the expense of confronting other challenges.

This note is written in a context of rising competitive pressures facing institutions of higher learning in both developed and developing countries, as well as persistent difficulties. In a relatively recent report, the World Bank’s Independent Evaluation Group (2017) identified three core challenges faced by institutions of higher learning in developing countries, which also apply for the most part in developed countries.

A recent World Bank report identifies three core challenges faced by institutions of higher learning in developing countries: lack of equity in access, risks of low quality, and lack of employability. In many ways these challenges are also present in high income countries.

First, access to universities and other institutions of higher learning remains highly unequitable, with the poor often excluded. This is especially problematic for Catholic institutions given their aim, in one way or another, to contribute to the preferential option for the poor. Realistically, Catholic institutions of higher learning will continue to face a major equity challenge in the foreseeable future.

The second challenge is the low quality in the education being provided by many institutions of higher learning, which contributes to delays in graduation and higher costs for both students and states. The problem of low quality is also prevalent in K12 education in many countries as noted by the World Development Report on the learning crisis (World Bank, 2018). Better preparation for students at the secondary level should help, but efforts to improve quality in institutions of higher learning are also key.

The third challenge is that of employability with, again in many countries, high rates of unemployment and underemployment among university graduates. This

comes in part from the issue of low quality, but it also relates to insufficient interactions between universities and the private sector. What students learn is not necessarily what is needed in the labor market (see Filmer and Fox, 2014, on sub-Saharan Africa, and more generally World Bank, 2019 on the future of work).

While a university education should not cater only to the demand from the labor market, it should lead to adequate employment opportunities given the financial sacrifices made by students, parents, and tax payers for acquiring tertiary education. In low income countries where the formal sector is small, this could for example mean putting a stronger emphasis on entrepreneurial skills, as well as a shift towards fields of study where labor demand is stronger.

While these challenges may be more severe in the developing world, they also apply to developed countries. This can be illustrated in the case of the United States. While enrollment at the tertiary level is much more widespread than in developing countries, low income students do face serious and rising challenges to acquire post-secondary education (Goldrick-Rab, 2018). Quality is perceived to be an issue, with substantial heterogeneity between institutions in the value added being provided and associated concerns about the cost of college (after years of cost increases above inflation) in comparison to potential benefits (Taylor et al., 2011). This concern relates itself in part to concerns about the availability of well-paying jobs after graduation and the vulnerability inherent to the ‘gig economy’ and the broader pressures from the changing nature of work (World Bank, 2019)<sup>2</sup>.

The objective of this note is to provide a broad overview of trends in enrollment in Catholic higher education globally and regionally from 1975 to 2018.

The objective of this note is to provide a broad overview of trends in enrollment in Catholic higher education globally and regionally from 1975 to 2018. Growth or even stability in enrollment is probably not a primary objective of Catholic institutions of higher education, but it does matter. A healthy enrollment level is necessary for financial sustainability in an increasingly competitive higher education market (e.g., Altbach et al., 2009; Salmi, 2009). It also contributes to the evangelization mission of the Church (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977,

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<sup>2</sup> Limited funding from governments whose budgets are often stretched thin may contribute to low quality in the education being provided by some institutions. This in turn is one of the factors (but by no means the only factor) leading to lack of employability. Affordability is an especially severe issue in the developing world, but it matters also in many developed countries. In the United States, declining support from states for tuition at public colleges and universities has been one of the factors leading to higher student debt over time.

2017). Beyond the Church, as is the case for K12 education, Catholic higher education provides benefits to society at large. Catholic institutions of higher learning provide choice for students and thereby contribute to pluralism in democratic societies. As already mentioned, there are also indications that Catholic institutions of higher education perform relatively well, including in terms of student graduation rates. Finally, as is the case for other private colleges and universities, Catholic institutions generate substantial savings for state budgets since most of the cost of education is born by students and their families.

Among Catholic universities and faculties, it is worth noting that two types of institutions can be distinguished. Ecclesiastical or Pontifical universities and faculties are established or recognized directly by the Holy See. Apart from often providing education in a wide range of disciplines, they may grant ecclesiastical degrees in theology, philosophy, and Canon Law. These ecclesiastical degrees are recognized by the Holy See and Pontifical universities are governed by Pope Francis' Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* which updated guidance provided in *Sapientia Christiana*. However, only a small minority of Catholic universities are Pontifical universities. The other universities are governed instead by Pope John Paul's Apostolic Constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. Beyond a focus on theology and related disciplines, Catholic universities and other institutions may also provide training in religious sciences more broadly, including for future teachers of Catholic religion. Separate guidance for this purpose for so-called Higher Institutes of Religious Sciences is provided by the Congregation for Catholic Education (2008).

The distinction between ecclesiastical and other Catholic universities is based on the ability of the former to grant ecclesiastical degrees recognized by the Holy See. But most students at Catholic institutions are enrolled in secular as opposed to religious programs of study.

The distinction between ecclesiastical and other Catholic universities is based on the ability of the former to grant ecclesiastical degrees recognized by the Holy See. Yet most students at Catholic institutions of higher learning are enrolled in secular as opposed to religious programs of study, even if they may be required to take one or more courses in religious studies over the course of their degree to graduate.

In most countries including those with a strong Catholic tradition, many students attending Catholic institutions are not Catholic themselves. In the United States for example, just over half of first year students at four-year Catholic colleges and universities self-identify as Catholic (Eagan et al., 2017). While a majority of students in Catholic institutions of higher learning globally are enrolled in

colleges and universities, the Church also runs a large number of other institutions at the post-secondary level, especially in the developing world. In India for example, according to Manidapam (2018), apart from a dozen large medical colleges and universities, the Catholic Church operates approximately 25 management institutions, 300 professional colleges and engineering institutes, 450 degree colleges, and 5,500 junior colleges, all of which are post-secondary institutions.

### Enrollment Trends

Data on the number of students in Catholic higher education are available in the Catholic Church's annual statistical yearbooks, with the most recent data available for 2018 (Secretaria Status, 2020). While the data are self-reported by the chancery offices of ecclesiastical jurisdictions that fill the annual questionnaire, they seem to be of sufficient quality to document broad trends over time. In a typical year, only about five percent of the ecclesiastical jurisdictions do not fill the questionnaire. As this is the case mostly for small jurisdictions, the missing data should not affect the overall results substantially for most countries and at the regional and global levels.

Based on the data from the statistical yearbooks, Table 1 provides estimates of enrollment in Catholic institutions of higher education for the three categories of students mentioned earlier and for the total number of students enrolled. Except for the last time period, the data are provided by five-year intervals from 1975 to 2018 globally and for five regions: Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, and Oceania. These regional aggregates are used because they are the ones according to which data are reported in the statistical yearbooks. In 2018, 6.5 million students were enrolled in Catholic Higher Education. Of those, 2.3 million were in higher institutes, 0.5 million were enrolled in ecclesiastical studies in universities, and 3.7 million were studying other topics at Catholic universities. Figures 1 through 4 visualize the trends in enrollment by region and globally. The analysis is kept at that level to keep the tables manageable, but data are available at the country level in the statistical yearbooks.

A few findings are worth emphasizing. First, the trends in Figures 1 through 4 suggest substantial growth in enrollment over time. The combined enrollment in Catholic higher education more than doubled globally between 1975 and 2018, from 2.5 million students to 6.5 million. Similar trends took place for K12 education. But while for K12 education most of the growth was in Africa, for tertiary education most of the growth in absolute terms took place in the Americas (gain of 2.1 million students), Asia (gain of 1.4 million students), and Europe (gain of 0.9 million students). In terms of annual growth rates, as will be discussed below, Africa is doing well, but it is starting from a low base, so that absolute gains remain smaller.

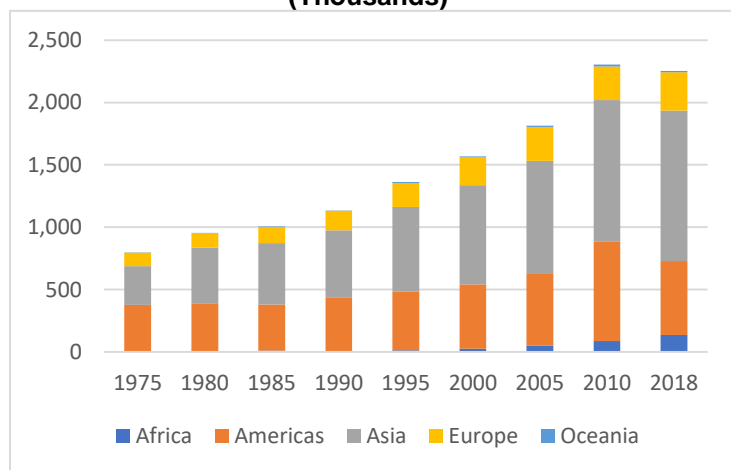
**Table 1: Trends in the Number of Students Enrolled in Catholic Institutions of Higher Education (Thousands)**

	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2018
<b>Higher Institutes</b>									
Africa	4.3	6.5	10.8	6.8	13.2	24.8	51.2	88.4	137.2
Americas	373.6	383.0	368.5	427.9	470.5	517.5	581.0	795.1	591.9
Asia	310.9	445.9	493.4	539.6	678.4	795.7	899.4	1,135.7	1,205.6
Europe	107.6	116.3	128.8	157.2	193.6	221.8	272.3	270.5	308.5
Oceania	2.5	3.1	3.9	2.7	5.7	8.8	9.3	14.5	8.6
<b>World</b>	<b>798.9</b>	<b>954.7</b>	<b>1,005.4</b>	<b>1,134.2</b>	<b>1,361.4</b>	<b>1,568.6</b>	<b>1,813.2</b>	<b>2,304.2</b>	<b>2,251.6</b>
<b>Universities – Ecclesiastical Studies</b>									
Africa	0.2	1.0	1.5	1.4	4.1	5.8	9.3	15.6	49.6
Americas	16.5	28.5	26.3	31.9	62.4	53.9	139.1	158.4	233.1
Asia	6.0	7.0	11.4	8.7	38.6	71.5	107.8	184.3	129.3
Europe	25.0	29.0	38.3	52.7	69.9	65.8	100.7	116.0	89.2
Oceania	0.4	1.3	1.6	1.7	2.9	3.8	10.6	12.4	6.7
<b>World</b>	<b>48.1</b>	<b>66.8</b>	<b>79.1</b>	<b>96.5</b>	<b>177.8</b>	<b>200.9</b>	<b>367.5</b>	<b>486.7</b>	<b>507.9</b>
<b>Universities – Other Studies</b>									
Africa	0.9	0.9	2.1	2.1	23.8	41.1	70.7	106.2	177.5
Americas	530.2	870.3	1,033.6	1,070.2	1,144.1	2,088.5	1,962.7	2,183.6	2,187.0
Asia	159.0	169.4	303.6	376.1	422.0	467.3	457.5	490.7	518.2
Europe	111.7	98.2	116.8	149.9	217.6	332.7	288.2	541.7	788.0
Oceania	0.2	0.2	0.1	2.6	1.7	5.1	10.8	16.2	36.9
<b>World</b>	<b>801.8</b>	<b>1,138.9</b>	<b>1,456.2</b>	<b>1,600.9</b>	<b>1,809.2</b>	<b>2,934.7</b>	<b>2,789.8</b>	<b>3,338.5</b>	<b>3,707.6</b>
<b>Total</b>									
Africa	5.3	8.3	14.4	10.3	41.0	71.7	131.2	210.1	364.3
Americas	920.3	1,281.8	1,428.4	1,530.0	1,677.0	2,660.0	2,682.8	3,137.2	3,012.0
Asia	475.9	622.2	808.3	924.4	1,139.0	1,334.6	1,464.7	1,810.8	1,853.0
Europe	244.2	243.5	283.9	359.9	481.1	620.3	661.1	928.2	1,185.6
Oceania	3.1	4.6	5.6	7.0	10.3	17.7	30.7	43.1	52.2
<b>World</b>	<b>1,648.8</b>	<b>2,160.4</b>	<b>2,540.6</b>	<b>2,831.7</b>	<b>3,348.4</b>	<b>4,704.2</b>	<b>4,970.5</b>	<b>6,129.3</b>	<b>6,467.1</b>

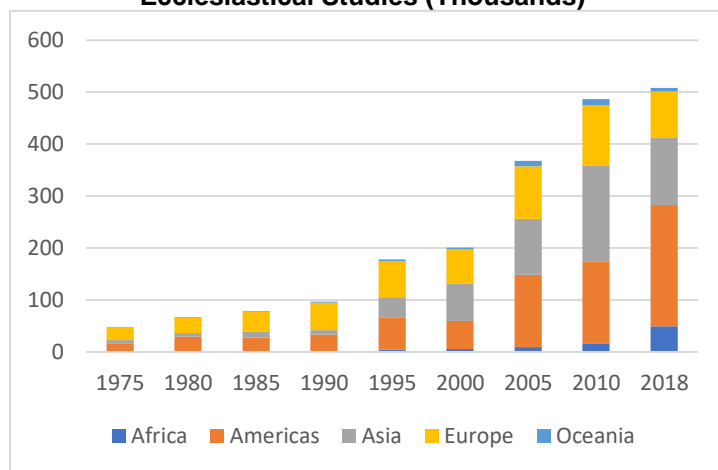
Source: Compiled by the author from the annual statistical yearbooks of the Church.

Note: Totals for 1975 are not comparable to subsequent years due to lack of data for nurseries and preschools.

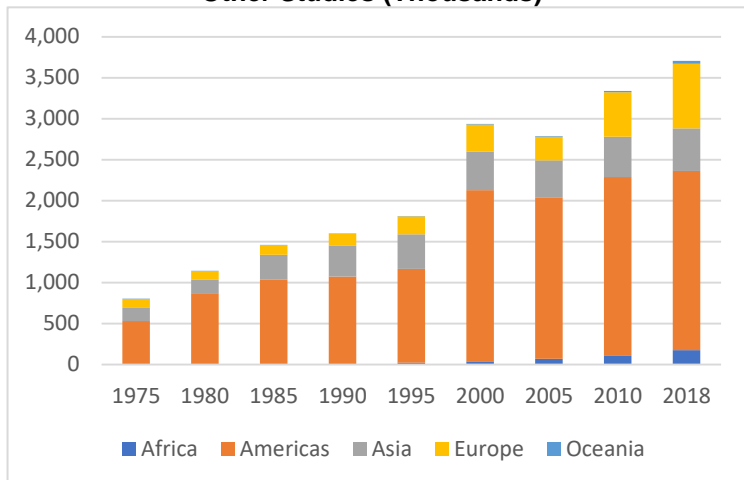
**Figure 1: Enrollment in Catholic Higher Institutes (Thousands)**



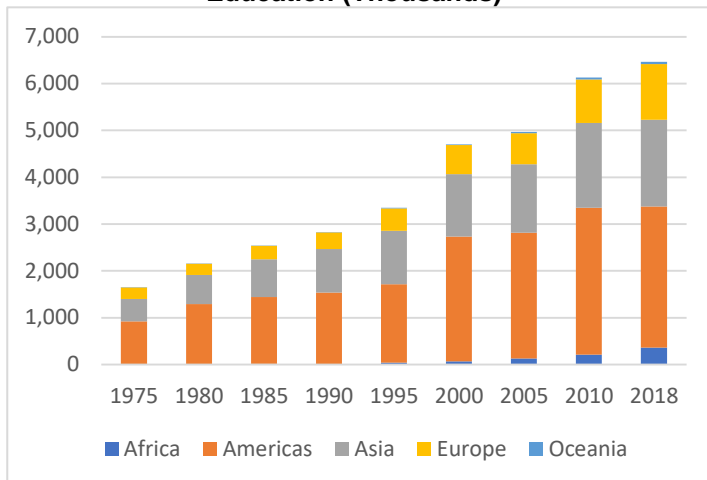
**Figure 2: Enrollment in Catholic Universities: Ecclesiastical Studies (Thousands)**



**Figure 3: Enrollment in Catholic Universities: Other Studies (Thousands)**



**Figure 4: Total Enrollment in Catholic Higher Education (Thousands)**



Source: Statistical Yearbooks of the Church.

In terms of the three categories of students, the largest gains were observed in absolute terms for university students not engaged in ecclesiastical studies and students in higher institutes, but large gains were also observed for students in ecclesiastical studies. While there may be a crisis in vocations in parts of the world, the number of students enrolled in ecclesiastical studies is nevertheless rising almost everywhere.

Globally, students in universities account for 65.2 percent of total enrollment, versus 34.8 percent for students in higher institutes. Yet in Asia, where India plays a major role, a majority of students are in higher institutes.

Second, as shown in Table 2 and Figure 5, there are differences between regions in the share of students enrolled by type of higher education. Globally, students in universities account for 65.2 percent of total enrollment, versus 34.8 percent for students in higher institutes. Asia, where India plays a major role (given virtually no Catholic institutions in China), is the only one of the five regions where most students are enrolled in higher institutes. This is related in part to the explosion of private non-university institutions of higher education in India as a response to a demand from the rising middle class for higher education. Globally, within university students, there are about seven students in non-ecclesiastical studies for each student in ecclesiastical studies, but again with regional differences.

Globally, the shares of students enrolled in higher institutes and universities did not fundamentally change over the last four decades, despite ups and downs by five-year intervals. But among universities, there has been a steady rise of the share of students enrolled in ecclesiastical studies. In 1975, these students represented less than three percent of total enrollment in Catholic higher education globally. By 2018, this had risen to 7.9 percent especially thanks to gains in Africa, the Americas, and Asia. By contrast, in Europe and Oceania, there was a substantial decline in the share of students in ecclesiastical studies between 2010 and 2018, albeit from higher baseline levels. Note that at the regional level, there are a few jumps in the shares reported in Table 2 for ecclesiastical studies. This is due in part to the fact that estimates of enrollment for these students are smaller in absolute terms, especially in Oceania, so that even comparatively small changes can lead to jumps in shares.

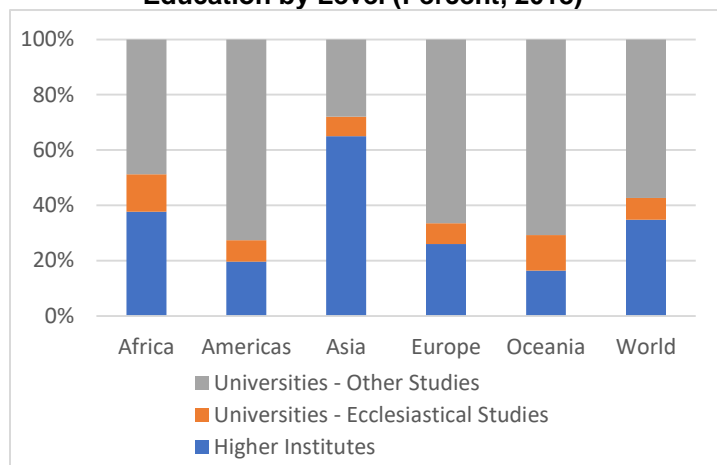
There has been a steady rise of the share of students enrolled in ecclesiastical studies. In 1975, these students represented less than three percent of total enrollment in Catholic higher education globally. By 2018, this had risen to 7.9 percent, more than twice the share in 1975.

**Table 2: Proportion of Students Enrolled in Catholic Institutions of Higher Education by Type (%)**

	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2018
<b>Higher Institutes</b>									
Africa	81.1	77.5	74.7	66.3	32.1	34.6	39.0	42.1	37.7
Americas	40.6	29.9	25.8	28.0	28.1	19.5	21.7	25.3	19.7
Asia	65.3	71.7	61.0	58.4	59.6	59.6	61.4	62.7	65.1
Europe	44.0	47.8	45.4	43.7	40.2	35.8	41.2	29.1	26.0
Oceania	82.5	67.4	70.4	38.0	55.7	49.6	30.4	33.7	16.4
<b>World</b>	48.5	44.2	39.6	40.1	40.7	33.3	36.5	37.6	34.8
<b>Universities – Ecclesiastical Studies</b>									
Africa	2.8	11.6	10.6	13.6	10.0	8.1	7.1	7.4	13.6
Americas	1.8	2.2	1.8	2.1	3.7	2.0	5.2	5.0	7.7
Asia	1.3	1.1	1.4	0.9	3.4	5.4	7.4	10.2	7.0
Europe	10.2	11.9	13.5	14.7	14.5	10.6	15.2	12.5	7.5
Oceania	12.4	29.4	27.9	24.6	27.9	21.7	34.5	28.8	12.9
<b>World</b>	2.9	3.1	3.1	3.4	5.3	4.3	7.4	7.9	7.9
<b>Universities – Other Studies</b>									
Africa	16.1	10.8	14.7	20.2	58.0	57.3	53.9	50.5	48.7
Americas	57.6	67.9	72.4	69.9	68.2	78.5	73.2	69.6	72.6
Asia	33.4	27.2	37.6	40.7	37.1	35.0	31.2	27.1	28.0
Europe	45.7	40.3	41.1	41.7	45.2	53.6	43.6	58.4	66.5
Oceania	5.1	3.3	1.8	37.5	16.4	28.7	35.2	37.6	70.7
<b>World</b>	48.6	52.7	57.3	56.5	54.0	62.4	56.1	54.5	57.3

Source: Compiled by the author from the annual statistical yearbooks of the Church.

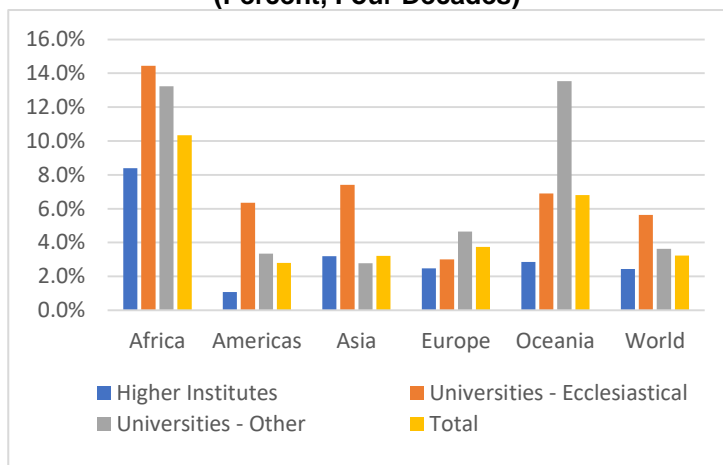
**Figure 5: Proportion of Students in Catholic Higher Education by Level (Percent, 2018)**



Source: Author's estimations from the Statistical Yearbooks of the Church.

Third, in proportionate terms, as a percentage change from the base, the highest growth rates in overall enrollment are observed in Africa, even though in absolute terms larger gains are reported in other regions. The annual growth rates from 1975 to 2018 (taking into account compounding) are provided in Table 3 and visualized in Figure 6. In Africa and Oceania, total enrollment grew over the last four decades at a rate of

**Figure 6: Annual Growth Rates in Enrollment (Percent, Four Decades)**



more than 13 percent per year. In the case of Africa, if the growth in enrollment continues to be higher than in the rest of the world, the region will account for a progressively larger share in total enrollment, but this will take some time. For students in ecclesiastical studies, the highest growth rates over the four decades are observed in Africa.

**Table 3: Annual Growth Rate for Enrollment in Catholic Institutions of Higher Education (%)**

	1975-1980	1980-1985	1985-1990	1990-1995	1995-2000	2000-2005	2005-2010	2010-2018	1975-2018
<b>Higher Institutes</b>									
Africa	8.5	10.8	-8.7	14.0	13.5	15.6	11.5	5.7	8.4
Americas	0.5	-0.8	3.0	1.9	1.9	2.3	6.5	-3.6	1.1
Asia	7.5	2.0	1.8	4.7	3.2	2.5	4.8	0.7	3.2
Europe	1.6	2.1	4.1	4.2	2.8	4.2	-0.1	1.7	2.5
Oceania	3.9	5.0	-7.5	16.4	8.9	1.2	9.3	-6.4	2.9
<b>World</b>	3.6	1.0	2.4	3.7	2.9	2.9	4.9	-0.3	2.4
<b>Universities – Ecclesiastical Studies</b>									
Africa	45.2	9.6	-1.8	23.9	7.4	9.7	10.9	15.6	14.4
Americas	11.5	-1.6	4.0	14.3	-2.9	20.9	2.6	4.9	6.3
Asia	3.1	10.3	-5.1	34.6	13.1	8.6	11.3	-4.3	7.4
Europe	3.0	5.7	6.6	5.8	-1.2	8.9	2.9	-3.2	3.0
Oceania	28.6	3.0	2.1	10.6	6.0	22.4	3.2	-7.3	6.9
<b>World</b>	6.8	3.4	4.1	13.0	2.5	12.8	5.8	0.5	5.6
<b>Universities – Other Studies</b>									
Africa	1.2	18.6	-0.4	62.8	11.6	11.5	8.5	6.6	13.2
Americas	10.4	3.5	0.7	1.3	12.8	-1.2	2.2	0.0	3.4
Asia	1.3	12.4	4.4	2.3	2.1	-0.4	1.4	0.7	2.8
Europe	-2.5	3.5	5.1	7.7	8.9	-2.8	13.5	4.8	4.6
Oceania	-0.9	-7.8	92.5	-8.6	24.6	16.3	8.5	10.9	13.5
<b>World</b>	7.3	5.0	1.9	2.5	10.2	-1.0	3.7	1.3	3.6
<b>Total</b>									
Africa	9.5	11.6	-6.5	31.8	11.8	12.8	9.9	7.1	10.3
Americas	6.9	2.2	1.4	1.9	9.7	0.2	3.2	-0.5	2.8
Asia	5.5	5.4	2.7	4.3	3.2	1.9	4.3	0.3	3.2
Europe	-0.1	3.1	4.9	6.0	5.2	1.3	7.0	3.1	3.7
Oceania	8.2	4.1	4.7	7.8	11.5	11.6	7.0	2.4	6.8
<b>World</b>	5.6	3.3	2.2	3.4	7.0	1.1	4.3	0.7	3.2

Source: Compiled by the author from the annual statistical yearbooks of the Church.

Fourth, as is the case in K12 education, there are substantial differences between countries in the size of their Catholic higher education networks. Table 4 provides data on the top 15 countries in terms of total enrollment in 2018. Together, these countries account for about four fifths of global enrollment. By comparison, the top 15 countries account for about two thirds of global enrollment in K12 Catholic schools. As expected given the correlation between enrollment in higher education and economic development, there is a higher concentration of enrollment in a few countries for higher education than for K12 education. The country with the largest enrollment is the United States, with close to 1.3 million students in higher education. Three large developing counties follow: India, the Philippines, and Brazil. Italy is next, due in part to the role of the Vatican and high concentration of students in ecclesiastical and other studies in Rome.

The smallest country in the mix by population size in Table 4 is Belgium, where under the Constitution Catholic higher education institutions benefit from public funding as do public universities. None of the countries in the top 15 are classified as low income by the World Bank (low income countries have a level of Gross National Income per capita of \$1,035 or less in 2019). By contrast, for K12 education, three of the top five countries in terms of total enrollment are low income (the Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi, and Uganda).

**Table 4: Top 15 Countries by Enrollment in Catholic Higher Education, 2018**

	Post-secondary (students)			Total
	Higher Inst.	Eccl.	Others	
United States	349,839	34,567	883,063	1,267,469
India	707,910	19,241	133,039	860,190
Philippines	364,209	47,632	164,997	576,838
Brazil	29,527	93,708	357,116	480,351
Italy	6,795	23,532	298,962	329,289
Colombia	19,613	3,271	267,241	290,125
Great Britain	45,028	118	207,809	252,955
Mexico	37,096	20,814	160,476	218,386
Belgium	122,903	2,582	80,503	205,988
Argentina	57,469	666	101,426	159,561
Indonesia	35,890	7,962	71,902	115,754
Spain	14,900	2,876	95,557	113,333
Chile	7,610	352	101,591	109,553
France	77,774	18,994	9,919	106,687
Ecuador	975	44,119	59,629	104,723

Source: Annual statistical yearbook of the Church.

Fifth, the fact that the highest growth rates in enrollment in Catholic higher education over the last four decades is observed for students in ecclesiastical studies may be good news for the Church. As mentioned earlier, these students account for a small but growing share of all students in universities, and their numbers are rising fastest in Africa and to a lower extent Asia. These are also the two regions where the number of diocesan

priests has been increasing the most in recent years, but the trend may also reflect the rising number of permanent deacons in comparison to priests in the Church. While this is beyond the scope of this paper, it would be useful in subsequent work to look in more details at the factors explaining the increase in the number of students in ecclesiastical studies.

### Box 2: Challenges in the United States

The United States continues to be the country with the largest enrollment in Catholic higher education, especially in colleges and universities. Yet the position of Catholic institutions of higher learning in the country is not as strong as it once was. While top-ranked universities are doing well, many lesser known institutions— Catholic and otherwise, were already failing to meet their admission targets in recent years even before the current crisis (Jaschik and Lederman, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated those difficulties. This has forced many colleges and universities to reduce costs, including through voluntary departures or layoffs.

Beyond the effects of the pandemic, the difficulties encountered by many colleges and universities are the result of a confluence of factors, including a reduction in applicants since a peak in 2010, which is due in part to demographic trends (the dip is likely to be temporary, as noted by Hussar and Bailey, 2018), concerns about the cost of college in comparison to its benefits (see for example Taylor et al., 2011), and rising competitive pressures. In addition, a perceived decline in the importance granted to religion by part of the population, or at least a reduction in the practice of religion (Smith et al., 2018), and rising operating costs due in part to fewer faculty and staff who are priests or members of religious orders, have been cited as additional concerns for Catholic higher education specifically.

For elementary and secondary schools, the challenges have been even more striking, with large losses in enrollment over the last four decades and progressively rising costs for parents to send their children to Catholic schools (McDonald and Schultz, 2018; Wodon, 2018). This decline in enrollment in elementary and secondary Catholic schools may also weaken enrollment at the tertiary level in the future. While some of these challenges are observed elsewhere, they tend on average to be less severe in other countries than in the United States.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this note was to provide a very simple descriptive analysis of trends in enrollment in Catholic higher education globally. Five main findings emerge from the data. First, enrollment in Catholic higher education more than doubled between 1975 and 2018 globally, reaching 6.5 million students by 2018. Second, in most

regions, Catholic institutions enroll more students in universities than in higher institutes, but in Asia, the reverse is observed. Third, in proportionate terms, as a percentage change from the base, the highest growth rates in enrollment are observed in Africa. In absolute terms by contrast, larger gains are reported in other regions, with most of the students in Catholic higher education still residing in high and middle income countries. The only region with a decline in recent years in the total number of students in higher education was the Americas. Fourth, there are substantial differences between countries in the size of their Catholic higher education networks. The United States still has the largest enrollment, but India is progressively catching up. Fifth, within universities, there has been a steady rise of the share of students enrolled in ecclesiastical studies, even if they still represent only about 12 percent of total university enrollment (not including higher institutes).

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