

Report from Switzerland (Deacon Martin Brunner-Artho)

Switzerland is a relatively small country with an area of 40,000 km² in which 8 million persons currently live. It is characterized by a deeply rooted democratic sense which on the one hand makes the decision making process slow and often leads to compromises, but on the other hand gives the State a large degree of stability. This fundamental democratic sense also characterizes the Church. The parishes are financially maintained by communities established upon the basis of the laws governing the Church-State relationships, and whose councils are democratically elected. The great stability and the fact that Switzerland was not affected by the two World Wars has led, from the 1960's onwards, to a relatively great prosperity. This, in turn, attracted many people from the south of Europe and more recently from all over the world to Switzerland. Within two generations, Switzerland was transformed from a country of emigration to a country of immigration. At present, one in three Swiss citizens has an immigration background. This fact has brought about profound changes to the face of Switzerland and has led to great tensions between the fundamentally cosmopolitan attitude (15% of the Swiss live as expats) and the isolationist tendency (it is only very recently that Switzerland became a member of the U.N. and – despite being situated in the heart of Europe, Switzerland is not an E.U. member either).

Out of the approximately 8 million inhabitants, 3.2 million, that is, 38% percent of the population belongs to the Catholic Church. There are 6 dioceses and two Territorial Abbeys (Einsiedeln and St. Maurice). There are no archdioceses in Switzerland. The Church is also affected by the social changes. Out of all the migrants currently living in Switzerland, 39% declare themselves Roman Catholic. At present, along with the German pastoral assistants, there are also many priests and lay people who work in Swiss parishes. In order to respond to the new circumstances and to the scarce personnel resources, huge efforts have been made in order to create new pastoral units and pastoral spaces. In Switzerland, there are very small parishes, which, nonetheless, were sufficiently staffed until recently. Generally speaking, there are profound changes in the Swiss Church. Even the Bishops' Conference is in the process of reforming its structures.

Permanent deacons serve in all dioceses. Except for the Diocese of Lugano, where the formation program has been halted for quite some time now, formation courses are also taking place. Deacons with a civilian profession can be found mostly in the French and Italian-speaking areas. However, the majority of deacons are working full-time in the ministry. Because of the fact that they are integrated in the ministerial structures of their respective dioceses, deacons' meetings at a diocesan level are rare. A meeting of the French-speaking deacons takes place regularly in the month of January, hosted by the University of Fribourg. The meeting of the German-speaking deacons will be re-launched this autumn and will take place in Zürich which is more centrally located than Fribourg.

Diocesan Statistics for Switzerland	Basel	Chur	Lausanne, Geneva, Fribourg	Lugano	Sion	Sankt Gallen	Einsiedeln	St. Maurice	Total Switzerland
Number of Catholics	1 118 000	696 758	659 000	259 000	247 700	262 129	70	6 154	3 248 811
Parishes	515	280	245	255	157	142	1	4	1 599
Churches and missions	-	129	3	-	2	11	-	-	145
Diocesan priests	429	342	268	194	136	87	-	-	1456
Religious priests	226	233	243	51	87	82	45	38	1 005
Permanent deacons	109	52	33	6	17	32	1	-	250
Women religious	2 235	838	573	341	281	359	-	50	4 677

Source: Swiss Bishops' Conference