International Priests in America
Two Coming Issues

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Based on their joint research, *International Priests: New Ministers in the Catholic Church in the United States* (Liturgical Press, 2006), the authors explore the pastoral trend of priests from abroad ministering in the United States. They investigate who they are, whether or not the U.S. church should continue to invite them, and how best to manage their entry and time here.

Studying trends in the church and the priesthood allows us to make predictions about upcoming issues facing the Catholic community. One issue, which is already active and will only intensify, concerns the movement of international priests from regions previously considered mission territories to America. It is part of the broader movement of priests from the poorer to the richer nations. In 1999 the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) responded to the new trend through its 1999 publication, *Guidelines for Receiving Pastoral Ministers into the United States*. In 2001 the Society for the Propagation of the Faith noted the new trend and called for a regulation of these international movements.

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debate today centers on whether to invite more international priests to serve in the United States, and, if so, how to manage their coming so as to enhance their ministry and contribute maximally to the mission of the church.

These two issues formed the agenda of a recent research project we carried out that was sponsored by the National Federation of Priests’ Councils (NFPC) and financed by two foundations. A committee composed of members of the NFPC and staff of the USCCB advised us. Our purpose was to document the number and types of priests who were born overseas (including Puerto Rico) currently serving in the United States, to hear their experiences, and to learn the views of American priests, vicars for priests, and lay ministers, and to compile dioceses’ policies of welcome. We limited our attention to priests who began their ministry in the United States in 1985 or later—thus excluding the earlier generations of international priests, mostly from Ireland. We included, but paid little attention to, priests now earning advanced degrees in the United States who are doing ministry part-time but expect to return home soon.

Based on a survey of United States’ dioceses and religious institutes of men and of international priests themselves, we estimate that there are currently 5,500 such priests, of whom about 87 percent are diocesan and 13 percent are religious. They are coming at a rate of about 380 to 400 per year, and make up 16 percent of all the priests in active service. The numbers are rising gradually, and in time they will comprise 20 percent or more of the total. Of the recent ordination classes from American seminaries, 28 to 31 percent of the men were foreign-born.

**Who Are These Priests?**

These priests come from a wide variety of nations—most frequently Colombia, Mexico, India, Vietnam, Philippines, and Nigeria. The only European country sending priests to the United States in noteworthy numbers is Poland. The international priests are younger than American priests; their average age was 47, compared with an average of 55 for nonretired American diocesan priests and 62 for nonretired religious. Most of these priests were trained and ordained overseas. In recent years, only about 20 percent of the international diocesan priests and 30 percent of the religious priests were trained and ordained in the United States.

They are often uncertain how long they will serve in the United States. A majority hope to serve for a few years and then to return home later. Only a few have a definite term of service, after which they will return home.

Of the diocesan priests, 34 percent in our sample said they were incardinated, and another 12 percent said, “I intend to be.” Of the religious priests, 89 percent are affiliated with a United States’ religious institute. Eleven percent of the diocesan and 16 percent of the religious are full-time students. The vast majority describe themselves as missionaries coming to assist the church in the United States.
Should We Invite More International Priests in the Future?

Yes: Three Arguments

First, America needs international priests to serve immigrant parishes. Immigration to the United States today is at an unprecedented level, and it is likely to grow even more. Most immigrants speak no English and strongly prefer to worship in their home language. Therefore, a large number of priests are needed from countries like Korea, Vietnam, Brazil, Mexico, and others to minister to the new immigrants. Nobody disputes this, but a question arises as to whether dioceses should incardinate foreign-born priests who do not speak English and whose future ministry will be limited to the immigrant congregations.

Second, America needs immigrant priests to fill in the gaps in its priest shortage. While the number of Catholics in the United States has been growing at 8 to 12 percent per decade, the number of priests has been declining at 9 to 11 percent per decade. American seminaries are not producing ordinations rapidly enough to meet the need, so the dioceses are looking overseas.

Third, international priests help universalize and revitalize American Catholicism. These priests can broaden the vision of the American laity, reminding them that Catholicism is a world religion of which America is merely one part. A priest from, let us say, Congo or Ghana, can influence Americans to see African Catholics as their brothers and sisters, and furthermore brothers and sisters who have something to offer to Americans. They can help us reevaluate parts of American culture—like weak family ties, waste of resources, and so on—by being a mirror for Americans to see ourselves from an outsider’s eyes. These priests are having a revitalizing effect in some parishes, where they bring their own spirituality, their music, and their devotions as a breath of fresh air. However, many American laity do not feel a need for such broadening, and they will resist pressures for any changes that do not feel right to them. So there are limits as well as possibilities.

No: Four Arguments

First, the most common argument today by far is that there are too many problems with international priests. Americans in general prefer American-born priests because of unhindered relationships and communication they can have with them. With international priests they experience problems that can be summarized here under five categories. The most common is language. The international priest does not command the English language well enough or that if he is English-speaking, his accent is so strong that Americans cannot understand him. We might call these two concerns “English competency” and “accent reduction.” They require somewhat different remedial actions, and in the case of accent reduction, some English-speaking priests from places like India or Nigeria will resist accent reduction, pointing out that they speak “the King’s English” and Americans have a worse
accent than they do. We have no doubt, after doing the research, that language problems with international priests need more attention than they have gotten until now.

The second category of problem may be called “cultural misunderstandings,” and it includes a range of irritating experiences, commonly involving issues of power and status and often involving relations with women. People told us that many international priests are not used to working with women who speak up, especially if they are on their parish staffs. In some developing nations, women’s opinions are not elicited or heeded. There are other cultural misunderstandings having to do with topics like marriage preparation, rectory living, approachability, or personal etiquette.

The third problem area is ecclesiology, and it is similar to cultural misunderstandings in that the main issues have to do with power and communication. Some international priests feel they deserve to be treated as if they are on a pedestal—just because they are priests. Others dislike any lay involvement in parish leadership, or they voice strict standards on controversial moral issues like cohabitation or homosexuality.

The other two problem areas with international priests are less common and less clear. One is a complaint that some international priests engage in fundraising for projects in their home countries, or that they privately solicit funds from parishioners for orphanages, churches, and other projects in their home countries. American dioceses have developed rules about fundraising on the side, yet the rules are not always clearly announced or enforced. The other complaint is that international priests do not mix well with American priests, partly for reasons of language, partly out of shyness. It is difficult to evaluate this last complaint, since a certain level of cliquishness is inevitable in presbyterates, and international priests are not to blame for it. Besides, many international priests told us they do not feel welcome by the presbyterate.

In sum, the problems people described to us about international priests are varied, but they come under a general category of inadequate preparation for ministry in America. These problems can, we believe, be alleviated.

The second main argument against bringing in international priests is that it is unjust to Catholicism in the rest of the world. Why, some ask, are wealthy priests having a revitalizing effect in some parishes, where they bring their own spirituality, their music, and their devotions as a breath of fresh air.
countries like the United States taking priests away from poor, developing nations when the number of priests available per 1,000 Catholics is much lower in most of the world? Let us review the statistics. In the entire world in 2002 there were 2,642 Catholics per priest. In the United States the figure was 1,375, and in Europe the figure was similar. In Asia, it was 2,473 per priest, and in Africa it was 4,694. The most extreme case is South America, where there were 7,138 Catholics per priest. Why American Catholics should take priests from these other continents with fewer than we do is a valid question.

First let us ask, why are we in fact taking them now? The answer, put simply, is because wealthy nations want them, and in some places in the developing nations there are more priests being ordained than the economy can support. A bishop in, let us say, India or the Philippines, has a limited number of paying positions open for placing newly ordained priests. He rejoices that numerous men are being ordained, but he can’t offer them jobs with salaries. Poor nations cannot afford the cadres of priests that exist in North America and Europe; they never will have as many as one priest per 1,375 laity, as America now has.

In addition, this bishop could possibly earn some income for his diocese by carefully sending his priests to wealthy places like the United States, France, or Britain. By doing so he could hope for financial contributions from them or from sympathetic laity, and the priests would have opportunities for earning advanced degrees and getting valuable experiences. The bishop could hope that after a few years the men would return to the diocese—but he cannot be sure, since he has limited influence on their decisions. In fact many never return. The priests themselves—at least a large portion of them—are happy to come to America for ministry. American dioceses, especially in the West and South, receive numerous inquiries from priests in poor nations who want to come.

An additional argument needs to be mentioned here. In the world, Catholicism is growing rapidly in Africa and Asia; it is growing slowly in the North America, and not growing at all in Europe. Millions of people are ready to be evangelized in many parts of the world, and those regions are the very parts of the world where priests are scarcest. Wouldn’t it be much better for the cause of Christ to put available priestly resources—as well as money—into those growth areas?

In sum, the reality is complex and not simply a matter of the rich buying priests away from the poor. It’s not just that the rich kids get all the toys. Yet, in spite of the complexity, an injustice does clearly occur when priests trained in poor nations
come to America and are incardinated into American dioceses. These men were educated at the expense of the sending dioceses, and the receiving dioceses owe those dioceses something—at least ten or twenty thousand dollars—for that education. A more pervasive injustice also needs to be named. It is that the conditions of seminary training and priestly life in wealthy nations like the United States are much better than in much of the world, and the wealthy Catholics need to do more to help their poor brethren.

The third argument against bringing in international priests is that it is only a Band-Aid solution to the more basic problem—the need to restructure parish life. The priest shortage is forcing us to make some basic changes, and leaders who resist the idea are postponing things by bringing in international priests. This argument is made mainly by laity who are increasingly restless with foreign-born pastors for their parishes, when they believe that spiritual and institutional leaders are available locally in the Catholic community. These potential leaders are, of course, not priests, but somehow they should be given sacramental and spiritual authority to lead American Catholics. This argument is much broader and touches on regulations governing the priesthood and ministry.

The fourth argument, which is almost the opposite of the third, came from a few bishops and priests. It states that bringing in international priests takes the pressure off of American laity to work harder at persuading their own sons to become priests. Put differently, lay Catholics need to encourage vocations harder in their own families and bringing in international priests lets them off the hook from doing so.

How Do We Manage the Process of Bringing in International Priests?

The second issue is based on the premise that, for better or worse, the Catholic Church in America will be inviting more international priests in the future. The pressures for doing so are strong. The issue is how it should be done for the good of all. One question is how to select the most suitable persons. We asked numerous American priests and laity about this.

Several people told us that, on balance, priests from Europe would serve American churches better than priests from other parts of the world, since the cultural distance is smaller. Also, religious priests, on balance, are seen as preferable over diocesan priests because of their international orientation and training. That is, many religious priests have had international experience before beginning ministry in America, and this helps them. We asked our interviewees about younger versus older priests and were told that younger priests are a better bet, since they have more energy, they adapt faster, and they learn English more easily.
Is it better to place international priests in urban or in rural settings? Most agreed that urban settings are easier, and especially cosmopolitan suburbs that already have an international flavor. In those communities the incoming priest will be received more readily and will have more contact with other people from his home country. All agreed that in no circumstances should a newly arrived priest be placed in a parish alone where no other priest is available to guide him.

Is it better to bring in already-ordained priests, or to bring in seminarians and train them here? Our interviewees mainly said that bringing in seminarians and training them here is better, since the seminary years serve as an acculturation period. However, in our survey we found that now only 19 percent of diocesan men and 23 percent of religious men were trained here in American seminaries. We heard two reasons. The first is that seminary training in developing nations is much cheaper than here. One priest from Vietnam told us that it costs about $5,000 for four years of seminary in Vietnam. This figure is probably extreme on the low side, but in most of the world the cost is certainly much less than in the United States. The second reason is that bringing in an international seminarian to study here is risky in that he may drop out before ordination. If he does, the diocese’s investment in his training is lost. The dropout rate is in fact quite high among international seminarians. In addition, if a diocese brings in a seminarian, the bishop needs to wait several years before the invitee begins service, and he may not want to wait.

In our survey we were able to compare the foreign-trained priests with the America-trained. We expected that the America-trained would be more adjusted to American society and more relaxed, but in the survey the differences turned out to be small. We were surprised. Perhaps it is because the American seminary education did not include enough exposure to American culture. We don’t know.

Cross-Cultural Dynamics

We were told over and over by international priests that moving from one culture to another and ministering in the new setting is stressful. It takes a toll on the priest. Moving across cultures is not for the weak or the faint-hearted, and not every foreign-born priest can do it. Americans need to understand that such a transition has special burdens and pressures that we as the receiving country need to assuage. Good cultural orientation programs are needed.

In our sample, 33 percent of the incoming diocesan priests and 35 percent of the religious said they had participated in such a program. Most of the programs were sponsored by their diocese or order, and most typically the programs lasted several weeks or several months. Everyone in the survey agreed that the cultural orientation experience was helpful.
If cultural orientation programs are so beneficial, why aren’t all incoming priests involved in them? It turns out that there are numerous reasons, including the cost and difficulty of mounting them, the lack of interest of many incoming priests in taking part, and the lack of time. Dioceses do not see it as a high priority: they need the priests now.

At least six cultural orientation programs for international priests are in operation in the United States today, most of which are underenrolled. They are Cultural Orientation Program for International Ministers (COPIM) in California; the Southeast Pastoral Institute in Miami, Florida; the Maryknoll Cross-Cultural Services program in New York; the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University in Louisiana; the Vincentian Center at St. John’s University in New York; and the International Priest Internship in San Antonio, Texas. We found them to be thoughtfully designed and run.

**Feelings of International Priests**

We tried to assess the level of satisfaction of international priests. The majority indicated they are happy in their ministry. However, many expressed a feeling of loneliness and lack of acceptance as equals by the American presbyterate. Some complained that whereas they see themselves as missionaries to America, the Americans do not recognize them as missionaries. The reason seems to be that Americans see their country as one that sends missionaries, not receives them, and besides, there is a suspicion among some Americans that priests from developing nations are here partly to enjoy the higher standard of living and the more numerous educational opportunities here. The incoming priests ask, does the level of wealth determine who is a missionary?

**Recommendations**

We asked our interviewees for recommendations. Here we present the top seven that we heard. Two of the seven are far-reaching and should be seen as long-range goals, not anything achievable soon. The first is that, since the present shortage in the United States cannot be solved solely through bringing in international priests, it requires a widening of leadership. One option is to broaden eligibility for priestly ordination to include women and/or married men. Another idea is to expand the sacramental functions of deacons. Options like these are international in their scope, not national, and thus they require international initiative.

The second long-range recommendation we have already mentioned above, that some sort of international rule should be set up obligating the wealthy nations to
help the poorer nations with the expenses of seminary training. The future will see surpluses of ordinations in various parts of African and Asia and subsequent flows of priests to North America and Europe, with the result that the wealthy nations will get priests without having to pay for their seminary education. It is a management issue and a moral issue, and somehow the wealthy nations need to help foot the bill.

The other five recommendations are different. They are feasible in the immediate future and should be seen as agendas for this year and next. All five received such widespread support that they represent a near-consensus.

1. Follow the rules in the USCCB’s *Guidelines for Receiving Pastoral Ministers in the United States* (1999). Its recommendations were applauded by people on all sides.

2. Upgrade the orientation programs for incoming priests. They should begin in the priest’s home country before he arrives on our shore. Include an assessment of English skill using a standardized test, and if English is lacking, postpone the man’s arrival. When the priest arrives in America, give him a period of time in a cultural orientation program before plunging into ministry.

3. The diocesan leadership should prepare a receiving American pastor and parish for the coming of the international priest. Publicize the incoming priest’s background, education, and talents, and meet with the laity and pastor ahead of time. After his arrival, sponsor welcoming meetings or mixers.

4. Assign each incoming priest a mentor who will meet with him for a year or two. Announce the mentor relationship publicly to all the presbyterate.

5. Diocesan or provincial leadership should meet with the international priests periodically to ensure that communications are open.

Our research has convinced us that the importance of international priests in this country will increase in the future. Numbers will increase. There is no short-term prospect that the United States will have as many priests in service as the laity demand. We must expect more to come from other nations. Americans should, in general, pay more attention to world Catholicism and, as part of that, should give more aid to the international priests coming here to serve.