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Father Aby Abraham, associate pastor at the Cathedral of St. Andrew in Little Rock, Ark., reads an India Times article about the ongoing COVID-19 crisis in India May 5, 2021. (CNS photo/Aprille Hanson Spivey, Arkansas Catholic)

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**LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS —** Thirteen priests from outside the United States ministering in the Diocese of Little Rock have had to stop working, and in some cases have had to return home, because of federal delays in processing immigration paperwork.

Work at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services has slowed, leading to uncertainty about the priests' future in Arkansas as well as clergy and religious workers elsewhere.

"It's not just our diocese, and in fact, several months ago we had a Zoom meeting with attorneys, civil attorneys throughout the country who work on religious immigration stuff to kind of brainstorm," said Deacon Matt Glover, diocesan chancellor for canonical affairs.

"It's not anything that any of our priests are doing wrong, or not doing quickly enough. It's a problem completely across the board," he told the Arkansas Catholic, newspaper of the Little Rock Diocese.

"So you might have someone who's able to be here legally, who has legal status, but their employment authorization document has expired, even though we have timely filed to renew it," Deacon Glover said.

There are "multiple ways in which someone might fall out of (legal) status and have to return (home) or even if they're here, they wouldn't necessarily be authorized to work and it puts them in a real limbo," he said.

Since 2017, movement on the processing of immigration documents "to put it charitably, is hugely backlogged," he added.

Policy changes also have made it difficult and sometimes impossible for paperwork — even if filed on time or before deadlines — to be processed before a person's legal status runs out.

Deacon Glover explained that it's a multifaceted problem that affects immigration cases throughout the country.

Religious workers come to the U.S. with a temporary religious workers via, or an R-1 visa, and can work for five years. At the end of that period, they can either return to their home country for a year and then travel back to the U.S. on a new R-1 visa.

Another option allows the religious worker to file paperwork to transition into being a "lawful permanent resident," obtaining a green card before the work period ends, he said.

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In other cases, if someone is already in the process of obtaining a green card, certain delayed steps in the process can cause their work authorization to be halted, leaving unable to legally work in the U.S. until their application is processed.

Among priests serving in the Little Rock Diocese who have been affected by these immigration delays is Father Aby Abraham, a member of the Indian Missionary Society who was pastor of St. Mary Church in Paragould, and Immaculate Heart of

Mary Church in Walnut Ridge. He returned to India Jan. 14 because his visa expired and his request to transition to lawful permanent residency was not processed in time. The diocese is planning for his return in February 2023.

On Feb. 6, Father Polycarp Ssebbowa was temporarily suspended from his role as pastor at St. James Church in Searcy and St. Richard Church in Bald Knob because of a delay in the renewal of his work authorization and green card approval. While he can remain in the U.S., he is unable to work.

Deacon Glover said Father Ssebbowa, a priest of the Diocese of Kasana-Luweero, Uganda, maintains his priestly faculties and is able to celebrate Mass and other sacraments, but he cannot carry out any responsibilities as pastor or be paid.

While the diocese is hopeful Father Ssebbowa's immigration case continues to proceed in a timely manner, there has been no indication of how long it will be before he can be reinstated as pastor. It also is unclear how many of other missionary priests with pending immigration cases could be impacted.

"It's hard to say. USCIS has started to look at implementing certain changes, which would make it potentially less problematic, minimize the kinds of disruptions that we've been seeing lately, but government moves slow," Deacon Glover said.

"So it could be a while before we see those changes actually implemented. Until those changes are implemented, this is kind of the new normal for the next several years I would say. It's just unfortunate," he added.

Father Amal Raju Punganoor Lourduswamy, pastor of St. Michael Church in Cherokee Village and St. Mary of the Mount Church in Horseshoe Bend, is moving through the green card process and may be affected by processing delays. A priest from the Diocese of Nellore, India, he has been in Arkansas since 2017.

"Everything is in the hands of God, and also in the hands of the government. If they are able to process it faster, then we might be able to get it," he said.

Deacon Glover said losing more priests could affect parishes having access to the sacraments or having to cut certain missions or activities.

"It can create this sequence of events where there's real instability," he said, "not just within leadership of a parish, but just the priestly ministry, the spiritual ministry to the people of a parish."