News

People are pictured in a file photo standing on the steps of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigrati

People are pictured in a file photo standing on the steps of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services office in New York City. The federal government has made a procedural change in how it processes green cards for foreign-born religious workers, meaning some foreign-born priests and religious sisters and brothers relied upon by U.S. dioceses may not be able to remain in the country. (OSV News photo/Keith Bedford, Reuters)



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For the global faithful accustomed to reports of an ongoing vocations crisis, the Vatican's March 2023 announcement that the worldwide number of seminarians, priests and men and women in religious orders has declined was hardly a surprise.

But in a particularly unwelcome revelation for American Catholics, the federal government announced that same month in a Federal Register notice a procedural change in how it processes green cards for foreign-born religious workers.

Such a bureaucratic technicality may seem unremarkable, but its practical implication is that – combined with dwindling native vocational numbers and historically high immigration – some foreign-born priests and religious sisters and brothers relied upon by U.S. dioceses may not be able to remain in the country.

"We've been in several conversations with the Department of State; the Department of Homeland Security; the White House," said attorney David Spicer, senior policy adviser for Migration and Refugee Services at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, "as well as meeting with members of Congress and their staff, to discuss these ongoing issues and the impact of this recent change."

To become a permanent American resident – and perhaps eventual citizen – immigrants apply for documents called green cards. For priests and religious, the application is often through the diocese they serve. The U.S. Congress sets an annual green card limit, separating potential immigrants into categories connected to family relationships and skills.

The existing system was already complicated.

Then, as The Associated Press reported Sept. 29, the U.S. State Department revealed that "for nearly seven years it had been placing in the wrong line tens of thousands of applications for neglected or abused minors from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, and would now start adding those to the general queue with the clergy."

"Since the mid-2010s," the AP continued, "a surging number of youth from these countries have sought humanitarian green cards or asylum after illegally crossing into the U.S. This change means that only applications filed before January 2019 are currently being processed."

And if an existing visa expires in the meantime, an immigrant must leave.

"Ever since that change was made and that backlog expanded, it basically resulted in religious workers having to wait, rather than a little bit over a year, to well over five years," Spicer explained. "This has impacted planning for dioceses across the United States; religious communities; and others who are relying not only upon the

priests who come from abroad, but many other religious workers as well."

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In response, the USCCB is urging Congress to support the Protect Vulnerable Immigrant Youth Act (S. 1885/H.R. 4285), which was introduced in June.

As Bishop Mark J. Seitz of El Paso, Texas, chairman of the USCCB's Committee on Migration, wrote in July to members of Congress, "This simple bill would significantly improve access to permanent legal status for eligible youth who now find themselves subject to a years-long visa backlog, unable to receive the protections they are due, by exempting them from the annual caps for the employment-based, fourth preference (EB-4) visa category."

"It would simultaneously," Seitz continued, "free up those limited visas for foreign-born religious workers and others who rely upon them to serve American communities."

At present, the legislative reference website GovTrack forecasts the Protect Vulnerable Immigrant Youth Act has a "2% chance of getting past committee" and a "0% chance of being enacted."

It's a cruel conundrum for a church dedicated to both aiding immigrants and refugees, while also caught in the midst of its own trend of declining native-born priests and religious – a trend bound to continue into the foreseeable future as new ordinations and religious professions are nowhere near replacement level and the U.S.' 62 million Catholic population increases.

"It's difficult to understand why – back in 1990 – Congress decided to sort of lump in these vulnerable kids with religious workers and others," said Spicer, "given that the kids themselves are not in any way employment-based immigrants. But that's sort of how Congress, in its wisdom, decided to proceed with that."

The USCCB is also requesting administrative changes the executive branch could enact, independent of Congress. That "would help to provide some relief," Spicer said, "although it's not ultimately the solution we need from Congress."

The National Study of Catholic Priests – released in 2022 by Catholic University of America's Catholic Project – indicated 24% of priests serving in the U.S. are foreign-born.

Of the U.S.' foreign-born priests, a full 15% were ordained outside the U.S., explained Brandon Vaidyanathan, associate professor and chair of Catholic University's Department of Sociology, and the study's lead researcher.

"If we assume, for instance, that foreign-ordained priests are largely on visas – that's a large chunk of your 15%, given just the priest shortage, and the number of parish closures," said Vaidyanathan. "A single priest is sometimes responsible for three to five parishes – so you can imagine with that situation, losing 10-15% percent of your priests, that becomes a serious crisis."

Additionally, the church has a number of foreign-born priests who came to the U.S. as seminarians, were ordained in the U.S. and are also subject to visa renewals.

While the study didn't record visa or green card status, "Anecdotally, you can see in pretty much every diocese you go to, there's a number of foreign-born priests that are there," observed Vaidyanathan. "Maybe they're visiting, or maybe they're there on a longer-term basis – but the diocese can't function without them.

OSV News' sample of selected U.S. dioceses indicated a growing impact from the green card and visa predicament.

"We are concerned about the unexpected waiting line for our foreign-born priests," said Bishop William M. Joensen of the Diocese of Des Moines, Iowa, also noting "the gifts of foreign-born vocations."

"These priests help us serve our dynamic immigrant populations and bring a new perspective to all the faithful," Bishop Joensen added, "often helping to keep parishes open or perform critical service, such as chaplaincies."

The Diocese of Des Moines' communications office informed OSV News the diocese has 35 foreign-born priests pending some level of immigration status approval; there are roughly 77 priests in active ministry.

"We are working with legal counsel to manage the government's new interpretation of the rules relating to the immigration waiting line," explained Bishop Joensen. "It

has created uncertainty for those in the process already and a true challenge to filling the ongoing needs of our diocese. A solution from the administration or Congress would be welcome news."

"It's already had an impact here in our archdiocese," said Father Michael Tix, vicar general of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

"For example, we had one priest – same issue, with the green card – who would otherwise have had to go home for a year. He's a religious order priest – and the religious order just assigned him to a parish in Canada," Father Tix shared. "So it's not just 'go away for a year' – he's not coming back."

In Oct. 2019, the Minneapolis Star Tribune reported that "more than 50 of the 203 full-time priests active in the St. Paul and Minneapolis Archdiocese" came from other countries.

"The international priests serving in our parishes – without them, we just don't have the numbers to cover everything," reflected Father Tix.

"You try as best you can – and God bless the priests that are asked to jump in and go the extra mile; because they're doing it," he said. "But you can only stretch people so far."

In the Diocese of Columbus, Ohio, 50 of 145 currently active priests – approximately 35% – are foreign-born, according to Anne Streitenberger, the diocese's human resources director.

Streitenberger is blunt about the procedural change: "We will lose opportunities for good priests in our diocese."

While student visas for those studying at the Pontifical College Josephinum in Columbus can sometimes provide a work-around, the options are not without expense.

And as a refugee hub, Columbus has a distinctive need for religious workers.

"Religion is very important to the refugees here – I've seen it," Streitenberger noted. "Religion seems to be the most important thing that gathers them all together. And if their leader can't get in here before them, they may have a hard time adjusting."

On the day Susan Montalvo-Gesser, a lawyer and director of Catholic Charities in the Diocese of Owensboro, Kentucky, spoke with OSV News, she had just spent almost five hours trying to help a priest resolve his expiring emergency visa.

When she first heard of the five-year green card application processing backlog, Montalvo-Gesser admits, "I immediately kind of panicked."

In 2022, Bishop William F. Medley told the Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer that 30 out of 78 of his diocese's parishes have foreign-born priests.

Montalvo-Gesser estimates the diocese may lose up to six priests, as well as sisters.

"We've already had to tell one of our religious sisters that we're going to lose her -- and she's done great work," said Montalvo-Gesser, noting there are no other options given her expiring visa and processing delays. "We can't make up that gap and she'll have to leave for a year."

Pastoral recruiting and planning continuity becomes almost an impossibility, Montalvo-Gesser shared.

"For our bishop to go to another diocese in a country and say, 'Hey, come to Kentucky where we can train you and you can get used to this population and serve us – but you may have to go back in five years," said Montalvo-Gesser, "it creates insecurity, and it's very difficult. I just hope and pray that they fix it."