The Field Hospital: NCR's new blog covering US parish life

by Peter Feuerherd
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The Field Hospital

Editor's note: "The Field Hospital" is NCRonline's newest blog series, covering life in Catholic parishes across the United States. The title comes from the words of Pope Francis: "I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds. ... And you have to start from the ground up."

"The Field Hospital" blog will run twice weekly on NCRonline.org along with feature stories and news reports about parish life in the U.S. If you have a story suggestion, send it to Dan Morris Young (dmyoung@ncronline.org) or Peter Feuerherd (pfeuerherd@ncronline.org).

As the synod in Rome on family issues ends, Newsweek offers a video profile of what one parish can do to minister with gay and lesbian Catholics. The program is called Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Educating and Affirming Diversity (LEAD), a ministry of St. Matthew's Church, Baltimore. See the video. Could be a model for what such outreach might look like in the age of Pope Francis.

Obviously Msgr. John J. McSweeney is a media-savvy pastor, who is all smiles for the camera as he shows a local television crew around St. Matthew's Parish in Charlotte, N.C. Not particularly noteworthy, except for one startling fact: the parish claims the mantle of being the largest in the United States with
34,000 parishioners. While Charlotte fits the profile of a once-largely Protestant area transformed by an influx of northern Catholic migrants, the report here indicates that more than demography is evident: there are more than 100 parish ministry groups active at St. Matthew's, truly a Catholic megachurch.

Why Catholic? That's the question being addressed by parishioners in the Diocese of South Bend-Fort Wayne Indiana. The program is offered by RENEW International, based in Plainfield, N.J. The program is based on the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

The first parish to be named for Blessed Archbishop Oscar Romero in the United States has been established in Eastvale, Calif., Diocese of San Bernardino.

Lots of attention paid lately to the decline in the number of active priests and church responses to what is deemed a long-running crisis. Catholic News Service reports on Cambria Smith Tortorelli, administrator of Holy Family parish in South Pasadena, Calif., a part of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. She is one of a handful of laywomen with that kind of position. One of the main objections to her getting the job is that the parish is a thriving one, and there were priests in line itching to grab that pastorate. Meanwhile, the blog FiveThirtyEight reports 20 percent of American parishes have no resident pastor and that there is now only one priest for every 2,600 Catholics, a number more than double from 1965.

The Catholic Diocese of Orange, Calif., has transferred $100 million in property assets to its parishes. Lawyers for abuse survivors don't see the move as a generous one: they are seeing it as a way to hide assets from potential lawsuits. Similar moves have been undertaken in dioceses in San Francisco, Portland, Ore., Spokane and Nashville. The crisis fallout still lingers.

Burmese Catholics are now part of the mosaic of Asians who now comprise a growing minority in the Church in the U.S. Burmese Catholics number only about 20,000 but Asian Catholics now number more than 3 million out of 71 million U.S. Catholics. John Sailon, from Columbus, Ind., a part of the Indianapolis Archdiocese, is the founder of the National Conference of Burmese-American Catholics, many of whom were on the frontlines of resistance to the military regime in their homeland. Most Asian Catholics in the U.S. are of Filipino background (2.2 million) followed by Vietnamese (483,000) and Chinese (340,000).

[Regular Catholic press contributor Peter Feuerherd writes from Queens, N.Y.]

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