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Global priest shortages, faith and reason in the U.K. and a loss in Ohio

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

I've said this so often I probably ought to have it printed on T-shirts: The most important Catholic story of our time is the demographic shift from the global north to the south, with two-thirds of the Catholics in the world today living in the southern hemisphere, a share that will rise to three-quarters by the middle of the century.

As a result, Latin America, Africa and Asia will play a far greater role in setting the tone for the global church.

One underutilized resource for pondering this transition is the missionary orders, with their long experience navigating cultural gaps. As it happens, I received two fascinating reflections this week from veteran missionaries, one an Italian Comboni serving in the Philippines, Fr. Renzo Carraro, and the other an American Jesuit currently in Malawi after many years in Zambia, Fr. Pete Henriot.

Although each covered a variety of topics, they intersect at a critical point: priest shortages and their frightening pastoral implications.

Admittedly, the idea of priest shortages in the global south may be counterintuitive for Catholics in Europe and the United States. Looking around, it's easy to get the impression of a surplus, given our growing reliance on priests from Africa, Asia and Latin America to plug holes here. In the United States, one of out every six priests is now foreign-born, and we add 300 international priests every year. It's a rare American diocese that doesn't have at least a handful of priests from locales such as Nigeria or India.

This trend has sometimes been labeled the "reverse mission," implying that territories that were once the

object of missionary activity are now returning the favor, dispatching zealous young priests to revive the faith in moribund regions of the West.

That's a compelling vision, but it hides a basic flaw: The math doesn't work.

Massive Catholic growth across the southern hemisphere in the late 20th century did generate a bumper crop of new vocations, but it also made priest shortages worse, not better, because the church can baptize people much more rapidly than it can ordain them. In the United States and Europe, the priest-to-baptized Catholic ratio today is 1 in 1,300; in Africa, it's almost 1 in 5,000; in Southeast Asia, it's 1 in 5,300; and in Latin America, it's a staggering 1 in 7,000.

Missionaries such as Carraro and Henriot stand on the frontlines of those gaps, and, taken together, their essays call for reflection on two points:

- Opening the priesthood to the *virii probati*, meaning tested married men;
- Reconsidering the current migration of priests from south to north, when arguably they're far more needed at home.

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Carraro, now 74 after a lifetime of serving in Africa and the Philippines, issued a manifesto in favor of the *virii probati*.

Drawing on his experience in the Philippines, he writes that the smallest parishes in Manila, the urban capital, have around 25,000 faithful, while typical parishes more often have 50,000, 70,000, even 150,000 Catholics, all served by a single priest.

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In rural areas, the situation is even worse: "Priests are obligated to run here and there to celebrate Mass, up to nine in a single day," Carraro writes, "with no time for the ministry of confession or catechesis."

He says students in Catholic schools often are constrained to go up to two or three years without the opportunity to make a confession because it's not available.

Carraro warns that unless something changes, the Philippines is poised to go the way of Latin America, with massive defections from the Catholic church to new Protestant "sects," usually meaning Evangelical and Pentecostal movements. Already, he writes, of the 90 million people in the Philippines, about 20 million have joined groups such as Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, followers of "Apollo Quiboloy," the "Iglesia ni Kristu" and countless others.

"What a shame," Carraro says, "to see our best Catholic men, whom we didn't allow in leadership because they're married, come back as Protestant reverends formed with a strong missionary spirit."

Carraro disassociated his plea for married clergy from more sweeping demands for reform, including the ordination of women, recently tabled by priests in Austria, Belgium and elsewhere. Faithful Catholics, he wrote, "are not expecting a change in that sector," and such "extremist" positions, he said, actually weaken the case for the *virii probati*.

For his part, Henriot was reacting to Benedict XVI's recent trip to Benin, especially the pope's document summing up a 2009 Synod of Bishops for Africa. Henriot, who's 75, found much to like, but also much to question.

Most relevant for our purposes are Henriot's thoughts on the priest shortage. He regrets that Benedict's insistence on Sunday as a holy day of obligation omits any mention "of the tragic and untenable situation that every Sunday in Africa, more and more Catholics are denied participation in the Eucharist because of the paucity of ordained priests."

While Benedict encouraged African bishops to respond "generously" to requests for priests from other parts of the world, Henriot calls for caution. He observes that during the 2009 synod, the African bishops simply noted that many of their priests are serving abroad, but they didn't encourage the practice.

"I feel more evaluation is needed of where is the greater need," Henriot writes.

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The comments from Carraro and Henriot reflect perspectives across the global south.

Some southern bishops see the movement of priests from south to north as a Catholic version of unjust migration patterns. Archbishop John Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria, put it this way in a 2006 interview: "What we don't want is to get into a *Gastarbeiter* situation, where a European priest feels overwhelmed having to say three Masses on Sunday, and so he wants a black man to say them. Surely this is not where the church wants to go, getting poor people to do jobs that the rich don't want to do, as today happens in other walks of life."

Onaiyekan understands why his brother bishops permit their priests to go abroad -- because it generates revenue. An African priest serving in the States typically returns some share of his salary to his local church; plus he has the opportunity to raise funds during annual missionary appeals and to promote sister parish relationships. Onaiyekan argues, however, that Western Catholics who want to support Africa ought to find ways of doing so that don't fuel a "brain drain" among their clergy.

Such perspectives also have been voiced, albeit episodically, in the Vatican.

In 2001, the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, the Vatican's missionary arm, issued a document titled "Instruction on the Sending Abroad and Sojourn of Diocesan Priests from Mission Territories." It warned that priests sent to study in Europe or the States often put down roots, in part because they're attracted by higher living conditions, in part because bishops in the north see them as a way of relieving shortages of their own clergy.

Slovenian Cardinal Jozef Tomko, then prefect of the congregation, said such transfers are damaging. India, Tomko said, doesn't have enough priests to take care of its 17 million Catholics, yet at that time there were 39 priests from India working in one Italian diocese alone. Overall, Tomko said, there were 1,800 foreign priests in Italy, with more than 800 working in direct pastoral care.

"Many new dioceses could be created in mission territories with such a number of diocesan priests!" Tomko complained.

In the Catholic church of the future, it's likely there will be rising pressure from the global south to reconsider the global distribution of priests, as well as mandatory celibacy -- not for theological or

ideological reasons, and not as the leading edge of a wider campaign of reform, but out of eminently practical and pastoral concerns.

The fact that such voices are likely to gain traction doesn't necessarily mean they're destined to prevail. Hearing them, however, will be part of the price of admission to the Catholic conversation of the 21st century.

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During the six years of Benedict's papacy, there have been several much-ballyhooed public relations meltdowns, but there have also been surprising triumphs, perhaps none as remarkable as the pontiff's bravura performance during his Sept. 16-19, 2010, trip to the United Kingdom.

The trip began amid predictions of disaster, including proposals from high-profile atheists and human rights activists to slap handcuffs on the pontiff for his role in the sexual abuse crisis. Yet in the end, Benedict led what amounted to a four-day national seminar on dialogue between religious faith and secular culture, and he seemed to get through. Prime Minister David Cameron told him, "Holy Father, you forced us to sit up and listen!"

This week, Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Westminster delivered a lecture at Netherhall House, an Opus Dei-affiliated residence for university students in London, extending Benedict's argument by identifying three areas where religion can play a positive role in a pluralistic and tolerant secular milieu.

Those areas, as Nichols sees them, are:

- First, "the search for community," over against "the pressures of individualism and the fact of isolation." Nichols argued that religious groups have vast experience reconciling the individual and the communal, which is wisdom post-modern cultures desperately need: "Give up on respect for diversity, and we become either dominators or dominated. Give up on the search for universality, and ... we splinter into a thousand fragmented and isolated groups or even individuals."
- Second, Benedict's notion of "human ecology" as a basis for ethical consensus. The Christian moral tradition, Nichols argued, can help strike the right balance between several human tensions: between being both relational and individual; between the spiritual and the corporeal; between existing in the present, but also as historical beings.
- Third, "the work of caritas, or practical care for the poor and those in need." The Christian contribution, Nichols said, is a reminder that poverty can never be reduced to a technical or policy problem -- "there is always a profoundly human dimension to poverty" that must elicit "human love, accompaniment and solidarity."

Taken together, Nichols suggested, these areas of constructive engagement between religion and secularity point "a new place for religious belief in the public square."

That new space, Nichols said, is being marked out "not with a power or desire to impose religious beliefs or their consequences, but with the recognition that a mature and enlightened public square should reflect the beliefs of those who share its space ... The secular public square should not be faith-blind, but faith-sensitive, welcoming and testing reasoned argument."

It will be interesting to see whether the makers of manners in the U.K. take up Nichols' invitation to test reasoned argument -- even if it's rooted in something a pope had to say.

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For all its woes, the Catholic church remains chock full of fascinating people -- both saintly souls and razor-sharp minds, visionaries and jokesters and savvy politicians, and every slice of life in between. The common denominator is that these are all compelling personalities who enrich one's life by the mere fact of being in it.

Alas, we lost one such personality last week, with the untimely death of Dominican Sr. Catherine Colby in Columbus, Ohio, on Dec. 2. Most recently, Colby had served as vice president for mission and identity as well as director of the Center for Dominican Studies at Ohio Dominican University in Columbus.

On a personal level, it's a shocking loss. I lectured at Ohio Dominican last Monday, where Sr. Catherine was my host. It was the third time she's brought me to the university over the years, and as always, she seemed amazingly full of life, laying plans for the future and dreaming great dreams about what the Center for Dominican Studies could continue to become.

Catherine was a classic embodiment of the best qualities of women's religious life in America -- tough, smart, willing to work as hard and as long as it took to get something done, with a keen sense of humor and a bottomless reservoir of faith.

Over the years, Sr. Catherine had served as a teacher and administrator in a variety of institutions, as well as vocation director and director of candidates for her Dominican congregation. In 2013, she was set to celebrate her Golden Jubilee as a Dominican sister.

I'm reminded of what longtime Vatican official Cardinal Jozef Tomko once said about the death of Pope John Paul II: "I miss him. On the other hand, it's good to have friends in Heaven!" For the scores of people whose lives Sr. Catherine touched, perhaps it's some consolation that we have a strong new friend in Heaven -- one, by the way, who won't be at all bashful about making the case for us when the time comes.

I invite prayers for the repose of Sr. Catherine's soul, for her family and her Dominican order, and for the community at Ohio Dominican University.

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