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Imported priests - Part Two

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

There were three published letters to the editor in reaction to the recent front-page series in *The New York Times* on priests being recruited from foreign countries to serve in dioceses of the United States (12/28/08-12/30/08).

The first two letters were implicitly supportive of the criticisms given expression here in last week's column, **A pastoral solution to the priest-shortage**. Paul Lakeland, a professor of theology and director of the Center for Catholic Studies at Fairfield University, referred to the importation of priests as "a classic example of wrongheaded ap-proaches to a real problem" (1/4/09).

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He pointed out: "To turn to foreign priests, however pastorally skilled they may be, places the ministers one step further removed from the communities to be served and risks the ire of a Catholic laity that sociological data show is more than ready to accept women and non-celibate men as its ministers."

A much shorter letter from Nancy Rowles of Covington, Kentucky, the state highlighted in the first and second of the three-part series, called attention to the "brain drain from countries in need of their own educated classes" apparently just to maintain an all-male celibate priesthood.

Fr. Thomas Costa, a pastor in Glen Cove, New York, in the diocese of Rockville Centre, took a different position. He referred to foreign-born clergy with whom he has served as "among the most generous, hard-working and inspiring priests" that he has known. His diocese, he claimed, "could not survive without our

brothers from overseas."

"Our people," he continued, "have become accustomed to multiple Masses, a priest available 24/7 for any pastoral need and an extensive variety of services from our large suburban parishes, most of which serve 2,500 or more families."

Many of these Catholics, Costa reported, are "deeply grateful to these foreign-born priests for making the sacrifices to leave their homes and families to serve in the church in America." Their presence among us helps us "to appreciate the universal or truly 'catholic' nature of our Catholic church."

No one, as far as I know, and certainly no one quoted in the series in the Times has questioned the generosity, hard-work, or inspiring personal qualities of these imported priests. That isn't the point.

It is an indisputable fact, however, that the importation of priests from foreign countries takes priests away from countries where there is a far greater shortage of priests than we have here in North America. The only exception is India, where the ratio of priests-to-Catholics is about half of what it is in the United States.

But Costa's letter also calls attention, perhaps unwittingly, to another, equally serious problem, cited by a priest from India in the third article in the series.

Fr. Jolly Vadakken had studied in Rome, has worked in parishes in Germany, Minneapolis, and Birmingham, and is fluent in five languages. He currently has offers to become a pastor in Italy and in Atlanta. But he prefers to stay at home where he runs a Catholic resources center across the street from the diocesan cathedral.

He operates a suicide hot line, counsels couples, teaches courses in parenting, and operates a program that mediates local conflicts. He said that he feels "more vital" as a priest in his native India than he did in the United States or Europe, where, he pointed out, he was needed only for the sacraments (as in the Diocese of Rockville Centre, for example, where many of the Catholics are, as Costa put it, "accustomed to multiple Masses").

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"In the other world," Vadakken noted, "we are official priests. We are satisfied just doing the Mass and sacraments, everything on time, everything perfect."

"In India," however, "the people come close to us. The work satisfaction is different. Our ministry is so much wanted here." (Would it not also have been appropriate to add the words "and needed" after "wanted"?)

The rectors of two large seminaries in India, with over 400 students each, insisted in separate interviews with *The New York Times* that the Catholic church in the United States and Europe will eventually need to stop relying on India (and other foreign countries?) to supply priests.

"It is not a solution," declared Msgr. Bosco Puthur, rector of St. Joseph Pontifical Seminary in Mangalapuruzha. "It is only a stopgap that does not solve the problem."

Enough said.

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