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DIVINE RECRUITS

Serving U.S. Parishes, Fathers Without Borders

By LAURIE GOODSTEIN

OWENSBORO, Ky. — Sixteen of the Rev. Darrell Venters's fellow priests are running themselves ragged here, each serving three parishes simultaneously. One priest admits he stood at an altar once and forgot exactly which church he was in.

So Father Venters, lean and leathery as the Marlboro man — a cigarette in one hand and a cellphone with a ring tone like a church bell in the other — spends most of his days recruiting priests from overseas to serve in the small towns, rolling hills and farmland that make up the Roman Catholic Diocese of Owensboro.

He sorts through e-mail and letters from foreign priests soliciting jobs in America, many written in formal, stilted English. He is looking, he said, for something that shouts: "This priest is just meant for Kentucky!"

"If we didn't get international priests," he said, "some of our guys would have had five parishes. If one of our guys were to leave, or God forbid have a heart attack and die, we didn't have anyone to fill in."

In the last six years, he has brought 12 priests from Africa, Asia and Latin America who are serving in this diocese covering the western third of Kentucky, where a vast majority of residents are white. His experiences offer a close look at the church's drive to import foreign priests to compensate for a dearth of Americans, and the ways in which this trend is reshaping the Roman Catholic experience in America.

One of six diocesan priests now serving in the United States came from abroad, according to "International Priests in America," a large study published in 2006. About 300 international priests arrive to work here each year. Even in American seminaries, about a third of those studying for the priesthood are foreign-born.

Father Venters has seen lows. Some foreign priests had to be sent home. One became romantically entangled with a female co-worker. One isolated himself in the rectory. Still another would not learn to drive. A priest from the Philippines left after two weeks because he could not stand the cold. A Peruvian priest was hostile toward Hispanics who were not from Peru.

"From a strictly personnel perspective," Father Venters said one day over a lunch of potato soup

with American cheese and a glass of sweet tea, “the international priests are easier to work with than the local priests. If they mess up, you just say, ‘See you.’ You withdraw your permission for them to stay.”

But there have been victories as well, when Kentucky Catholics who once did not know Nigeria from Uganda opened their eyes to the conditions in the countries their foreign priests came from — even raising $6,000 to install wells in the home village of a Nigerian priest serving in Owensboro.

“You’re taking a shot in the dark getting these guys,” Father Venters said. “But honestly, other than a few, we have had really, really good results.”

In earlier eras, the Catholic church in the United States depended on foreign priests from places like Ireland, Italy, Germany, Poland and Belgium. But they usually accompanied their immigrant flocks, and ministered to their own people in their native language.

Nowadays, however, the missionary priests have little in common with the Americans who often come to them for advice and solace in times of crisis. In Owensboro, it falls to Father Venters, who grew up on a farm in Illinois and has barely traveled outside the country, to find ways to bridge the often large cultural divides. One foreign priest had never seen a microwave. Another thought the frost on his car one morning was the work of vandals.

“There’s this assumption that a priest is a priest,” said Father Venters, who, as the vicar for clergy, is essentially the bishop’s assistant on personnel issues. “On the church side of it, that’s correct. We are a universal church and the rituals are the same, so he knows how to be a priest. The challenge is, he does not know how to be a priest in the United States.”

To succeed, Father Venters has also had to learn to navigate the immigration system, which has become so restrictive since the Sept. 11 attacks that even priests with invitations to work have trouble getting into the country.

At one point, he sent so many FedEx letters to Nigeria that the Department of Homeland Security suspended his account until he proved he worked for a legitimate church.

A Shrinking Pool

In 2002, when Father Venters began his recruitment drive, he was looking at a diocese that, like many in the United States, had growing needs and fewer priests to serve them.

Hispanic Catholic immigrants were pouring into Kentucky, drawn by jobs in poultry plants and construction. The diocese estimates that its Catholic population of 60,000 includes 10,000 Spanish-speaking parishioners who arrived in the last 10 years.

But the pool of priests was shrinking, from retirements, deaths and a handful who were removed from ministry after accusations of sexual abuse of young people. They were also growing elderly: eight were over age 70.

Many dioceses faced with shortages were shutting or consolidating parishes, but that was not an option for Owensboro. “Because we’re so rural,” Father Venters said, “closing parishes doesn’t make sense. Some of our counties just have one Catholic church.”

At first, Father Venters felt discouraged by the stilted English and obsequious tone of the letters foreign priests sent. One was even addressed, “Dear Very Rev.,” with a blank left where the name should go.

Then an e-mail message caught his attention. The English was clear, the tone humble. “I welcome your assistance and advice,” said the message from a Kenyan priest, Chrispin Oneko, who was serving five impoverished parishes in Jamaica.

Father Venters asked him for an “audition tape” of his preaching, and found the homily thoughtful — the accent pronounced, but clear enough. He invited the priest to fly to Owensboro to meet Bishop John J. McRaith.

The foreign priests in Owensboro earn the same amount as their American counterparts: a base salary of $1,350 a month, plus $60 for each year since ordination. (The pay scale varies among dioceses, and many pay foreign priests significantly less than Americans.) They can also earn as much as $130 a month in Mass intentions, or special requests, plus $50 for weddings and $25 for baptisms. For the African priests, it is a windfall.

Father Venters knows that many of the foreign priests send part of their income home, to help with school fees, food and medicine for their families. And yet, he said, he does not believe money, though a benefit, is the reason the priests he recruited were willing to come to America.

“A lot of them, they know we need priests,” he said. “And after getting to know them, I believe they truly have a missionary spirit.”

The notion of having to go out and recruit priests was foreign to Father Venters. He had converted to Catholicism as a young adult, had a college degree in agribusiness and was trying to figure out his next step when one day, he heard a priest give a homily about being of service to others.

“Suddenly everything else blacked out,” Father Venters said, “and I just kept hearing that word — service, service, service — echoing in my head.”

Back then, he phoned the Diocese of Owensboro and asked to sign up for seminary. His class at St. Meinrad School of Theology had 48 students, and in 1989, he was one of seven new priests ordained by Bishop McRaith.

But within 10 years, the vocations dried up. It has been five years since a new priest was ordained in Owensboro. The next ordination, of two priests, is expected next year.

Most of the priests serving in Owensboro support Father Venters’s recruiting drive, but some voice doubts. The Rev. Dennis Holly, with the Glenmary Home Missioners, an American order dedicated to serving regions that are not predominantly Catholic, like Western Kentucky, believes America

is essentially taking more than its share of resources, behaving like a mere consumer by spending money to attract priests from countries that have even greater shortages. He thinks the Catholic church should place priests where they are needed most around the globe.

“We experience the priest shortage, and rather than ask the question, ‘Why do we have a priest shortage?’ we just import some and act like we don’t have a priest shortage,” Father Holly said. “Until we face the issue of mandatory celibacy and the ordination of women, we can’t deal with the lack of response to the invitation to priesthood.”

But Father Venters is a pragmatist. He said those were good questions, “but, in the meantime, you have to respond to the needs of people.”

Reaching Out for Help

After the Kenyan priest arrived, Father Venters went on a recruiting spree, collecting priests from Nigeria, Uganda and India.

The bishops in Africa were far more willing than those in Latin America to allow their priests to leave because some African dioceses were ordaining so many they could not afford to keep them on the payroll. But Father Venters really needed priests who spoke Spanish. He cast a wide net, sending letters to every bishop in Mexico describing the diocese’s dire situation.

He got few responses. It turned out that the bishops in Mexico were receiving similar pleas from bishops all over the United States. And the Mexican bishops have a priest shortage of their own. (Mexico and Central and South America have one priest for about every 7,000 Catholics; the United States has one for every 1,500.)

Father Venters did not give up. After many false starts, he finally succeeded in recruiting a suitable Hispanic priest, the Rev. Jose Carmelo Jimenez Salinas, who had been beaten by the police for marching with his parishioners — indigenous peasants siding with Zapatista rebels against the Mexican government. His bishop thought a trip to the United States would give things a chance to cool down.

Father Jimenez had not wanted to come. In Mexico, he knew he was needed. Sometimes he traveled 12 hours on horseback to reach Catholics who had waited six months for a priest to come baptize their babies. “I thought the U.S. had no needs,” he said, a wide grin revealing capped front teeth.

In Kentucky, Father Jimenez was given a car, on which he logged 2,500 miles each month driving to his four parishes.

His cellphone rings constantly, with parishioners who need rides, who are scared in immigration raids, who need money to stave off an eviction or bail a relative out of jail. He accompanies them to the jail and the hospital, often to translate, even though he barely speaks English. By the time he returns to the rectory, often after 11, he is exhausted.

In 2006, the Owensboro recruiting drive struck gold. Father Venters met the Rev. Benny

Valayath, an Indian priest serving in Lexington, Ky., who belongs to an Indian society of priests called the Heralds of Good News.

The Heralds' purpose is to supply priests to places that need them. Most of the Heralds serve in Africa, Papua New Guinea and the tribal areas of India. But in recent years they have begun to send priests to the United States and Europe, too.

It is a very practical arrangement. With the money the Heralds earn in the first world, they can support the society's priests in developing countries, Father Valayath said. From March 2006 to June 2007, six Indian priests arrived in Owensboro. The first three were assigned two small rural parishes each, in the rural Lake Barkley region.

In one, the people were so afraid that the diocese would close their parish that they were relieved and elated to hear about the Indian priest. But in another church, a parishioner had only one question: "How dark is his skin?"

Some of the foreign priests had confided their apprehensions to Father Venters. They had studied American history in school and knew about racism, the civil rights movement and the Ku Klux Klan. "I told them that, as much as I hated it, there is prejudice — but it's nothing like when I was growing up," Father Venters said.

In a parish that received an Indian priest, five older couples asked to leave, objecting to his accent. In the end, only three changed parishes.

"We never had a parish that rose up in revolt" against having a foreign priest, Father Venters said. "The longer they're in a place, the better it gets."

Adjusting to America

In helping the new priests deal with culture shock, Father Venters saw his own culture in ways he never had before.

When he took one new arrival to a restaurant, it dawned on him that "Texas toast" and "Buffalo wings" required some explanation.

"When they come over they have no connection to our national holidays," Father Venters said. "Thanksgiving means nothing to them. Halloween was a new thing to a lot of them. Those are cultural things, which I learned that I take for granted."

One of the newest Indian priests, Father Shijo Vadakumkara, made a trip to the local PetSmart to pick up food for the rectory's cat. He wandered the aisles murmuring, "All this is for pets?"

Father Venters has sent most of the international priests to live the first few months with an American pastor who could teach them the ropes, though in one case a visa took so long to arrive that a recruit from India had to go directly from the airport to his new parish to celebrate Mass. Within a short time, however, the parishioners were taking their new priest fishing and tubing.

Father Venters checks in often on the recruits and said he was regularly heartened by what he found.

Father Venters watched from the back row as Father Julian Ibemere from Nigeria celebrated a noon Mass for 32 parishioners, most of them elderly.

Majestic in a green chasuble, Father Ibemere delivered his homily strolling up and down the aisle. When it was time to distribute the eucharist, he bent down to give communion to a man he knew was too ill to stand.

After the Mass, however, one member of the congregation, Virginia Ballard, gestured toward the Nigerian priest and confided in Father Venters, “I can’t understand what he said, but he’s a sweet young man.”

Mrs. Ballard went on to praise Father Ibemere’s knowledge of the Bible, his capacity to remember the names of congregants, his willingness to teach the Americans about his home in Nigeria. “He is a holy man,” she concluded, “and we are honored to have him.”

Early this year, the priests of the Owensboro Diocese gathered at a lakeside retreat for four days of private meetings, prayer and fellowship. The foreign priests chose seats among the Americans. In the evening, the priests scattered to various recreations, a test of how well they had really clicked. Some kept to their own kind: a handful of American priests watched “Evan Almighty.” Another American group headed off to a nearby casino.

But others mingled easily with the foreign priests in a conference room where the bishop had stocked a full bar. At a round table nearby, a group of American and Indian priests played Uno. When the electricity went out, one American ran to his car to fetch votive candles from his trunk, and they continued playing by candlelight. “It reminds me of home in Kenya,” Father Oneko said of the blackout.

At lunch on the last day, Father Venters and some of the priests reflected on the retreat’s sessions that focused on their needy “sister” diocese in Jamaica. Father Vadakumkara, the young Indian priest, announced that he wanted to go to Jamaica next year to help out in parishes that had no priests.

Father Venters put down his fork, startled at the thought of another vacancy.

“And who do you think will sub for you when you are gone?” he asked with a laugh. “You’ll have to get your own sub.”

Monday: One priest’s story.