



## **A Coming World Shortage of Priests?**

Last week I attended a Parish Pastoral Council meeting.

Our new Parish Priest said, “ I am from the Philippines, a member of the Society of Our Lady of the Trinity, a missionary order, and I can say that we are all excited as the whole focus of my Order is on the start of this, our new mission to Australia and in particular to this parish.”

This situation is now commonplace throughout the world, as priests from developing countries (the majority world, both in population and in practising Catholic population) are recruited to wealthy countries such as Australia.

Priests and religious coming to Australia are genuine missionaries, often finding it a great struggle to work and live here. The status of priests in Australia, language and cultural shifts are a great challenge.

The question is; will this flow of priests be available going into the future? If not, what will stop it?

For the next decade it should be possible for Australia to gain priests from overseas, despite the fact that in absolute numbers, the shortage of priests is often in fact much greater in countries from which we are receiving priests, than in Australia itself. Missionary orders and mission-minded bishops will send priests to Australia because we have a need for them. In this we see not only the SOLTs and similar orders in urban Australia but also the Divine Word Missionaries who are taking up most of the pastoral work in Central Australia from the ageing Australian Sacred Heart Missionaries.

A second reason is the wealth of Australia and similar countries. Some Australian and U.S. bishops are funding training to African priests studying here, who also celebrate Sunday Masses, and this supports the diocese back home. Some U.S. dioceses are paying a fee to African dioceses for the use of their priests. It is also true that some migrant priests to Australia save much of what we would see as a paltry income to send home to their families and to former parishes. Compared to what a priest in rural India might earn, say \$15 per week, his income here is immense. Some migrant priests hold collections in their parishes for church and charitable needs at home. Therefore there is a financial attraction in coming here.

It is likely that by 2020 this easy flow of priests to Australia will start to decline. What will stop this transfer to Australia in the middle term will be three factors, the decline in the large numbers of seminarians in developing countries which are growing

wealthier, the growing concern of Bishops in Africa and Asia regarding the pastoral needs in their own continents and the lack of funds for the training of priests, and the work of priests in developing countries.

In areas such as Kerala, the Southern Indian state which has provided around 2,000 priests to countries such as Australia, the growing wealth of the country correlates with a reduction in the growth of seminarian numbers. There is also an understanding in the minds of bishops and seminary directors that wealthy countries need to address their own lack of vocations, and a concern that moving to a wealthy country is not always in the best interests of a priest's spiritual life.

China's seminaries cannot keep up with the growth of the Catholic population, so in one of the Church's most important mission fields, there is already a priest shortage. If China opens up to the outside, this will draw priests from missionary orders and dioceses now sending priests to wealthy countries.

In Africa, life as a priest can be very difficult, and increasingly less attractive as other opportunities emerge. The Catholic Mission Director in Malawi, one of Africa's poorest countries, told me: "the priest's life here is very tough. A priest will need to travel constantly, to say 30 villages, looking after the people's needs. There is very little money at all to do their job. They become exhausted. Often seminarians will come for a practical assignment in a parish, experience the reality of a priest's life, and leave the seminary soon after." Countries like Nigeria which are sending priests to Australia may well be called to send more priests to other African countries.

The third issue is the lack of funding for seminarians. A Vietnamese Bishop visiting last month explained the need to cut back his seminary intake this year due to a lack of funds. His diocese is not particularly short of priests but his action will reduce the future availability of priests for ministry in countries like Australia. External funding to seminaries in Nigeria is being cut significantly.

Catholic Mission could easily double its funding for seminarians and would still need more, both to allow more suitable candidates to join the seminary where vocations are still growing and also to build and renovate many dilapidated and crumbling seminary buildings.

It is likely that without concerted action including international co-operation and funding, the growth of seminarians in developing countries will peak in the next decade. Not only might the shortage of priests in countries like Australia be unable to be met from outside, but the shortage of priests will start to increase again in parts of Africa and Asia as the Catholic population grows faster than the equivalent number of seminary graduates. We could well face a growing and world-wide shortage of priests.

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