

## International Priests

By Patricia E. Hudson, CSJ, Ed.D., LMHC  
Consultant to the VIRTUS<sup>®</sup> Programs

Often, we may wonder why we have international priests, from locales all over the world, serving in parishes throughout our country. The comments usually focus around language barriers and cultural differences. I became interested in the issue of international priests during the past five years when I had the opportunity to present VIRTUS<sup>®</sup> training to groups of them shortly after they arrived in my Diocese. When I engaged in some formal research into the history of international priests in the United States Church, I was surprised to find that having them serve in our parishes is not a new concept. The only time the United States Catholic church had enough native born American priests ordained to serve the needs of this country was during the 1940's and 1950's (Hoge & Okure, 2006). Every other time in our history we were served by international priests and we continue to need their service today.



The USCCB Secretariat for Child and Youth protection has collected some interesting data through Diocesan responses during the 2009 audit to give us a sense of who we are talking about. They found that the largest groups of international priests come from India and Ireland. Other large groups are from the Philippines, Mexico, Nigeria, Poland, and Columbia. Yet in any Diocese within the United States, the majority of international priests might not be from any of these countries because there are priests coming from such unexpected places or small countries such as Sri Lanka or Malta. The exact number of international priests serving in this country is difficult to determine. The mobility of international priests and the fact that they are arriving in the United States and leaving for home at varying intervals means that the numbers continually change.

In the book, *International Priests in America* by Hoge & Okure, (2006), the authors recount some of the interviews they had with international priests and their pastors. Many of the priests speak of not being welcomed or having too little information about their role in the parish to be successful. Others expressed appreciation for the wonderful welcome they received. Pastors made many helpful suggestions such as enculturation programs that might be helpful. I have interviewed dozens of international priests as well as pastors who welcome them to their parish communities. Many with whom I have spoken have reported the same difficult experiences as recounted in the Hoge and Okure book. It was also heartening to hear many others speak of wonderful welcoming experiences. There are stories where parishioners assisted the Pastor in helping the priest feel welcomed by inviting him to a meal in their homes. Others have spent volunteer time assisting him with English pronunciation. Still others reviewed the homily with the priest so that he could be confident that he had chosen appropriate and understandable language. Not all international priests, however, are open to the welcome they receive and some do not respond appropriately to the mandates of the Charter. This is a concern—they can become lost in our huge complex cities or isolated rural areas where they minister.

Because of concerns about international priests, the USCCB office that deals with Migration made some recommendations in 1999 that are still appropriate today. With the addition of Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People mandates (2002, 2005, rev.), the document and Charter related additions are reasonable guidelines for our current concerns.

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The following is a brief summary of the guidelines:

- 1) The international priest should have an orientation to American culture and the American Catholic Church particularly with emphasis on Child and Youth Protection, and the roles of Deacons and the laity (particularly women) before he reaches our shores.
- 2) Clear expectations of the international priest regarding parish/diocesan duties, educational opportunities, fund raising, finances and a return home date as specified by his home Bishop.
- 3) The international priest needs a mentor as soon as he arrives who has the following qualities:
  - is welcoming and hospitable, can assist with bank accounts, shopping, taxes, social norms and expectations
  - has the wisdom to understand the needs of the international priest as well as assist him to become an effective parish priest by pointing out behaviors that might be misunderstood or that are unacceptable or even illegal in the United States culture
  - is passionate about following the mandates of the Charter for Child and Youth Protection and any other Diocesan selected programs such as the Protecting God's Children<sup>®</sup> program.

Additionally, parishioners should be prepared for the arrival of the international priest and should assist in the process of welcoming him.

- 4) The international priest should be welcomed as part of the presbyterate.

We, as the Church, recognize international priests as our brothers and must treat them with the kindness that the Lord calls all of us to when we interact with our brothers and sisters in Christ. They are new in our culture and are often misunderstood because of language or culture, but they are among us as fellow travelers on the road to salvation. Let us seek to make their journeys with us safe and joyful.

## Program Updates

- We are currently working with Patricia Hudson, CSJ, Ed.D., LMHC on a program for international priests coming into the United States. The goal is to support the need for a Safe Environment/Child Protection Program that is designed to meet the needs of international priests so they function more effectively in ministry and within the parameters of the Charter during their time in the United States.

This goal will be accomplished by:

1. Exploring the ongoing experience of international priests in this country.
  2. Looking at data and anecdotal stories that help us understand the needs and the problems that are specific to international priests who are new to the United States.
  3. Reaching beyond our mandates as Safe Environment Coordinators as we recognize the need for an understanding of the cultural backgrounds of international priests and how it impacts ministry.
- The Teen Program, to be completed in 2010, will address healthy relationships and boundaries for young people. It will identify the following unhealthy relationships:
    - Sexual abuse
    - Physical abuse
    - Emotional abuse
    - Domestic violence
    - Bullying/cyber bullying
  - The National Catholic Risk Retention Group, Inc. will host our *Seventh Annual Conference for VIRTUS Program Coordinators* on August 26 and 27, 2010 at the Embassy Suites Hotel, Downtown Lakefront in Chicago, just two blocks from the popular Navy Pier. This conference is a convenient way to meet other coordinators, discuss common problems and their solutions, learn the latest news regarding improvements to the program, and experience the power of communication.