Importing Foreign Clergy

Issues and Prospects

Robert Schreiter, C.PP.S.

The author offers a perceptive analysis of various issues to be taken into account when importing clergy to work in the U.S. Catholic church. He considers five distinct groups involved: the incoming priests, the bishops, the parishioners and lay ministers, the presbyterate, and the diocese as a local church.

A much talked about, but as yet little studied, phenomenon shaping parish and diocesan ministry in the Catholic church in the United States today is the practice of importing clergy from dioceses outside the United States to serve in this country. These clergy are coming at the invitation of diocesan bishops to work in dioceses for a term appointment (usually of three years), or with the option to incardinate for long-term service. This practice is in response to a continuing decline in the number of clergy available for ministry in parishes, hospitals, and other religiously related institutions.

According to Georgetown University’s Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), these foreign clergy now constitute sixteen percent of all active priests in parish and diocesan ministries. The impact of these clergy on church life varies. In some rural dioceses, they now constitute nearly thirty percent of the active clergy. Added to this is the fact that nearly one-third of the seminarians studying in U.S. seminaries and preparing for work as diocesan

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priests are foreign-born as well. Four countries appear to be the principal (although far from only) sources of these priests: India, Nigeria, the Philippines, and Poland.

Bringing foreign priests to serve U.S. Catholics is nothing new, of course. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, both dioceses and religious orders brought seminarians and priests in great numbers to serve the church in the United States. In Ireland, especially, there were even entire seminaries whose sole purpose was to prepare priests for service abroad. Ireland continued to produce priests for this purpose well into the middle of the twentieth century, and a number of these priests (known in the U.S. colloquially as “FBI”s—“Foreign Born Irish”) continue to serve in dioceses to this day. Similarly, German, Italian, and Polish clergy were imported to serve the needs of those ethnic communities.

Why then are people talking about the issue today as though this were a new phenomenon? Part of it is simple historical short-sightedness. A rapid growth in the number of U.S. priests from the mid-1920s to the mid-1960s drastically reduced the number of foreign clergy imported, except in the “home mission” dioceses of the south and far western parts of the country. For many heavily Catholic areas of the U.S., there was a surplus of clergy that sometimes went to work overseas. This was especially the case after Pope Pius XII called, in Fidei donum, to send priests to Latin America. Many religious orders and dioceses responded and sent large numbers in that direction. Our short memory makes us blind to what had before been a common phenomenon.

The church that imported clergy in the nineteenth and twentieth century was still very much an immigrant church, trying to absorb and settle large numbers of people coming from Europe. Often clergy and religious women accompanied the immigration, and dioceses only needed additional foreign clergy as a supplement. A common sense of language and culture made those clergy seem less “foreign,” or at least no more foreign than the parishes they served.

From 1925 to 1965, there was relatively little immigration into the United States. But starting in 1965, with changed immigration law concerning agricultural workers from Latin America and general immigration from Asia and the Pacific, a new wave of immigration began that was to affect the Catholic church especially. But two other demographic phenomena were changing the U.S. church at the same time. Thanks to the educational resources made possible by the G.I. Bill after World War II, the settled Catholic church moved from being a

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largely working class community to a middle-class, well-educated population—indeed having the highest mean level of education and income of any Christian group in the country by 1990. During that same time of rising educational and income prospects, the number of clergy began a steep decline because of both departures from ministry and fewer candidates entering the seminaries. Bringing in foreign clergy was now needed not only for arriving immigrants from Latin American and the Asian Pacific regions, but also to staff the middle- and upper-middle-class parishes in the suburbs.

Some of the rhetoric about the new imported clergy is tinged with concerns about class and race. Well-to-do Catholics may see some of the arriving clergy as denizens of poor countries and not their class or educational equals. The complaints about Indian and Nigerian “accents” when speaking English are likewise tinged with racism—as though American English was not itself yet another accent or idiolect in what is now the world’s most widely spoken second language.

So how to approach this whole phenomenon of an increasing number of priests imported from elsewhere (as well as the rising number of seminarians who come from elsewhere to undertake their theological formation)? Dioceses were beginning to look at the impact of this development and were trying to look at the policy implications for diocesan ministry a few years ago, but the clergy sexual abuse scandal has consumed most of the energy that had been devoted to this issue. There are no national policies in place, although a few documents have been circulated. The challenge is multifaceted, both as to the theological, canonical, and cultural issues raised for the identity of local churches and their ministries, but also in terms of the different audiences or populations that need to be involved in the discussion.

This article is an attempt to begin sorting out the issues that are at play in this discussion, and to point to some of the prospects that are likely to arise as this practice continues. It will be divided into two parts, therefore: issues at play and the audiences impacted, and prospects to be discerned for long-term policy formation. Most of the literature that has appeared on this topic has been anecdotal or descriptions of specific instances. At the same time, I have been called upon by some dioceses to help them look at these matters. It is the combination of this anecdotal material, scattered (and unpublished) attempts at pastoral policy, and the experience that has grown out of numerous conversations that will inform
what I have to say here. It should be understood as a first attempt to survey the
issues that are arising and the prospects that are appearing.

It should also be said at the outset that it would be wrong to paint this whole
picture as a problem. In the anecdotal information that is arising, there are many
success stories of foreign clergy who have adjusted well to a different situation,
and have been received warmly by the people whom they serve. The purpose of
the remarks in this article is to smooth further the way for both incoming clergy,
but also for the different groups within the church who are involved in this new
development.

**Issues in Importing Clergy**

*and the Audiences Involved*

The way I will proceed here is to talk of the different audiences involved in
this conversation, and try to point out the issues that arise for each. This
kind of kaleidoscopic approach will yield, I hope, something of the range of
things that are going to need to be taken into consideration. It will also indicate
how different groups will need to be engaged in the conversation of creating
good relationships and effective ministry for the U.S. church.

There are five audiences that will be addressed here: the incoming priests, the
bishops, parishioners and parish staffs, the diocesan presbyterate, and the diocese
as a local church. I will speak of each in terms of an array of issues that are
arising.

**Incoming Priests**

The first group to be considered is the incoming priests themselves. There are
three sets of issues that need special attention here: the expectations placed upon
them by their coming to the diocese, issues of acculturation to the new situation,
and the “fit” between their training and the local church they are now serving.

Perhaps the most glaring lacuna in the whole challenge of importing priests
has been the failure to provide for most of them any orientation as to what will
be expected of them. What most often occurs is that they are seen as a human
resource to fill a gap in the current delivery of services to the people. The assump-
tion is made that, since they are priests, they will know what to do in their new
situation. Not only are the terms (canonical and otherwise) of their engagement
in the diocese not spelled out, but they are given little introduction to the culture
in which they are entering, no knowledge of the make-up of the population they
are being called upon to serve, and no background into the theology that informs
the sense of priesthood and ministry in the places they are being called to serve.
There are exceptions to this: Sts. Cyril and Methodius Seminary in Orchard Lake,
Michigan, has an orientation program for Polish priests and seminarians coming
to work in the United States. It provides one good approach to what should be
done for other populations of incoming priests. Some ecclesiastical provinces
have discussed having orientation programs, but few if any seem to have gotten
beyond the planning stage.

In terms of cultural orientation, it is not surprising that so little has been done.
Culture as a part of education and formation for ministry is still largely un-
attended to in the U.S., if what is being done in terms of multicultural parishes is
any indication. It is always hard for a majority culture to think of itself as a cul-
ture that might be perceived as different or foreign to others. Perhaps only when
culture and intercultural communication is taken more seriously will this problem
be addressed. Until that happens, incoming priests are left on their own to ad-
dress cultural difference, as well as the “culture shock” of moving into a new culture (if they
have not had this experience previously).

The one issue likely to be addressed is language. This is obvious in the case of those who
do not know English. For those who have Eng-
lish as one of their languages, this issue often
becomes one of entering a program for what is
unhappily called “accent reduction.” This can be
demeaning for people who are fluent in English.
A personal experience informs my thinking on
this. While a student at Oxford University, I was
told by another student that, if I could stay
another year, I might learn to speak English!
The student meant it as a compliment on how
I had “progressed” since being there. Little
attention has been paid to how members of
parishes might adapt their capacity to under-
stand English to the newcomers. By not doing so,
it is as if the incoming priests are being treated
as “hired help” of a lower class. More sensitive
ways need to be found to address this issue.

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English is spoken today in a great variety of ways, and (often monolingual)
Americans could stand a little stretching to accommodate others.

A frequently heard complaint also is that the theology of priesthood out of
which the incoming priest acts clashes with that of the parish he is called to
serve. This often happens in parishes that have extensive programs of lay
ministry and a consultative way of decision-making. If a priest comes in acting
like a monarch and does not accommodate to the patterns of ministry already in
place, conflict is likely to arise. To be sure this sometimes happens with other,
non-foreign priests who arrive at a parish. But if an incoming foreign priest is
not prepared for legitimate differences in how to approach priestly and parish ministry, then a great deal of stress takes place for both the priest and the parish.

How might these questions be addressed? In terms of expectations, some dioceses are now working to draw up something like a contract that makes explicit the expectations being laid upon the incoming priest, and the possible sanctions if these are not fulfilled. The latter has become important because there have to be judicious ways of terminating ministry in a diocese if it becomes clear that things are not working out. This is necessary for the pastoral well being of the diocese, and also for saving face for the priest involved. (This is especially true for most of the incoming priests who are from sociocentric cultures where concepts of “honor” and “face” are important cultural factors.)

Absent the development of regional orientation programs, dioceses should consider developing mentoring systems for incoming clergy. The ideal mentor would be a priest who has served outside the United States and who is familiar with the culture and local church in which the incoming priest has lived and received his formation. Such a mentor can help bridge the divide between the two cultures and help introduce the incoming priest to the society and the ecclesiastical culture he is entering. It also provides the incoming priest with someone to turn to with questions as he faces a new culture and even the difficulties of leaving behind his home culture.

**Bishops**

Bishops have a responsibility to provide the sacraments and ministry to the people of their diocese. It is precisely that sense of responsibility that has prompted them to seek priests elsewhere when they do not have a sufficient number in their own presbyterate. A lot of ill will has arisen when bishops decide to do this without consulting their priests or their lay ministers. As a result, the incoming priests can receive a frosty welcome from their fellow priests and within parishes.

Obviously a more consultative approach with both priests and people will smooth the way for incoming priests. Consultation about how many such priests are likely to be needed in the near future, what special qualifications should be looked for, and conversation about how to prepare both the incoming priests and the diocese for all of this will go a long way to smoothing relations.

A system that has worked well in some places involves a bishop making an agreement with a bishop elsewhere about providing a certain number of priests. This is often done by the U.S. bishop agreeing to fund the education of the seminarian who then will be destined to work in the U.S. diocese. This has the advantage of allowing for some screening of possible candidates and preparing both sides for the transition. It is generally preferable to simply waiting for priests to apply from elsewhere on their own. It does not preclude accepting priests from other sources, but would guarantee and routinize the pathways for accepting new priests into the diocese.
Once the priest has arrived in the diocese, there is a responsibility to provide an orientation and mentoring that will ease the transition for all concerned. That has already been addressed in the previous section.

**Parishioners and Lay Ministers**

Perhaps the most important interface between incoming priests and the diocese is the actual situation in which these priests serve. Questions about preparation of the incoming priests have already been addressed. What is often not attended to is the preparation of the people in the parish and the parish staff.

If the parish is largely monocultural, it may need help attending to its own reaction to people different from themselves. Quite frequently, foreigners are perceived as less educated and less culturally refined. If the new priest speaks English with a different accent than most of his parishioners, this perception may be reinforced. Lack of knowledge about the culture he is entering may make the priest ignorant of customs parishioners take for granted. A little training in intercultural communication, especially for parishioners serving on the parish council and other bodies likely to have a lot of contact with the priest, can help minimize these reactions. Anecdotal evidence suggests that if an incoming priest is kind and not authoritarian, he will be readily accepted by the people in the parish, even if there are difficulties of language. A second thing that can be done is providing a process of introducing the priest to the parish and the parish to the priest. If the priest talks about his own background, his family, and his experience of faith, it will make him less a stranger. If the parish has to speak about the parish, they become more self-conscious of who they are as well. Both sides listening to each other make it more of an encounter between human beings rather than between faceless groups.

Special attention should be given to the preparation and introduction of the ministry team of the parish. There may be fear that the new priest will close down the ministries that have developed, or act in some other authoritarian manner. Efforts must be made to educate both the priest and the staff to what they have been doing and how they hope to work together. From the side of the bishop it is important to make this one of the expectations of the incoming priest.
The Presbyterate

Priests who are already part of the diocese constitute an important group in the whole process of importing priests. When they are not consulted by their bishop prior to the introduction of new priests, they may make life difficult for the new priests by being uncooperative or even hostile. They have to be involved in the whole process.

This begins with convincing the presbyterate of the need to bring in priests. The presbyterate has to believe that this is necessary, and that it will not harm the legitimate lay ministry that has been developed in the diocese. The presbyterate itself may have to overcome feelings of racism or xenophobia regarding the new priests. Besides learning something about intercultural communication, it can preclude classist relations emerging wherein the new priests become a separate (and lower) class of clergy within the diocese. Beyond being asked to help determine how many such priests will be needed in the near future, being asked to determine the working conditions and how to engage them within the ecclesiastical culture of the diocese will add a key support for the new priests. The new priests then will be seen as collaborators within the presbyterate. When this does not happen, what often develops are parallel presbyterates that do not talk with one another. Moreover, the possible advantages of having foreign priests in the presbyterate must be explored. The skills in ministry they bring may help with the many cultures with which the diocese must now deal in the reality of the United States today. It can offer other ecclesiastical perspectives that the diocese has not been exposed to up until now.

The Diocese as a Local Church

Importing foreign clergy is often perceived as a stop-gap measure: if the diocese only had enough of its “own” priests, there would be no need to bring in priests from the outside. That may well be the case, but the need to bring in priests can also be used to important theological advantage.

According to the teaching of the church, the people of God gathered around its bishop is a sign of the fullness of the church as a particular or local church. But no such local church is the complete church in itself; it achieves being part of this only through its communion with other local churches and the bishop of Rome. Having priests from other local churches can remind a diocese of that communion in a number of ways. Just the presence of priests from elsewhere is a reminder of that. So too it can remind us of the responsibility of local churches to help one another in their need.

It can help enlarge our perspectives of mission as well. Priests from outside the United States who encounter scepticism about their presence in the U.S. often remind us that they too, in their own countries, have often had to accept priests from elsewhere as “missionaries.” Sometimes those missionaries did not bother to learn the language and customs of the people well. Sometimes they ministered

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in patterns contrary to local expectations. Sometimes they did not mingle with local clergy or the people. Such a realization on the part of a diocese can sensitize people to how they have treated others in the past and to accept, with a certain humility, that even though the United States is a rich and powerful country, it too can need gifts from countries poorer than we are. An awareness grows that the Catholic Church really is a world church, and that this “world” is now in our midst, not just “out there” somewhere.

Prospects for the Future

This article has tried to address some of the issues that are arising as priests are being imported from other countries. There are three approaches or attitudes that will contribute to the success or failure of this venture: the quality of communication among all parties concerned, foreseeing consequences and conflicts, and giving profile to how this enriches a local church.

Most of the suggestions made about what steps to take have been around thinking through the problem and creating a pattern of communication to keep all parties to the conversation involved. This has to do with planning, orientation, enhancing (intercultural) communication skills, and being explicit about the theology that underlies our sense of church and ministry. To the extent that this is done, it will keep communication moving and make the experience a positive one for all involved.

At the same time, it is clear that the process is fraught with challenges that create conflicts. Beyond good communication, it is worthwhile to think of other unforeseen and unwanted consequences that may arise. For example, if all the younger priests in a diocese are foreign, what effect might that have on vocation recruitment to the priesthood? Will young people begin to think that you have to be a foreigner to be a priest or that priesthood is only a job for foreigners? Given some measure of xenophobia is likely, this should be thought about. Or to take another example, if a presbyterate is already divided (say, between a middle-aged and older group who take a progressive reading of Vatican II, and a much more conservative younger group), will incoming priests have to choose with which group they are going to associate? Knowing the inherent difficulty of intercultural interaction, it is wise to think about what potential obstacles might be.

Finally, seeing the presence of priests from elsewhere as an enrichment, rather than a stop-gap, can help a diocese see itself as part of the communion of churches that make up the Catholic Church. Having the concrete reminder of this in its midst can help a diocese be a more proper steward of this dimension of Catholic identity.