

A pastorally sensible solution to the priest-shortage

Richard McBrien | Jan. 26, 2009 Essays in Theology

Just after Christmas, *The New York Times* ran a series of page-one articles on the importing of priests into the United States. Although the focus was on India and various African countries, the phenomenon is much broader than that.

In the past, missionaries were recruited from countries with a surplus of priests, such as Ireland and the United States, to minister in countries with a dire need of priests, such as the countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Has something happened to reverse that situation? Is there now a higher priest-to-people ratio in the United States than in the countries from which some American dioceses are now recruiting priests?

The answer is a resounding ?No.?

Essays in Theology by Fr. Richard McBrien

According to the *Times* and the *Statistical Yearbook of the Church*, in 2006 there was one priest for every 1,510 Catholics in the United States. That contrasted with a ratio of one priest for every 6,276 Catholics in Mexico, one priest for every 8,513 Catholics in Brazil, one priest for every 4,214 Catholics in Nigeria, one priest for every 4,343 Catholics in Kenya, one priest for every 6,845 Catholics in Uganda, and one priest for every 8,478 Catholics in the Philippines.

Only in India, among the countries supplying ?missionary? priests for the United States, is the ratio more favorable than that of priests-to-Catholics in the United States. In India, as of 2006, there was one priest for every 786 Catholics.

So the evidence is clear: the Catholic church in the United States is drawing down the number of priests in countries in much greater need in order to supplement the dwindling ranks of the priesthood in the United States.

Yet another point needs to be stressed: These ?missionary? priests are not being recruited from Uganda, for example, in order to minister to congregations of Ugandans in the United States. For the most part, there is not a single Ugandan in the U.S. dioceses to which these Ugandan ?missionaries? have been called.

Rather, these imported priests are simply replacing priests who have died, retired, or resigned, and are serving in whatever parishes need them for the celebration of Mass and the administration of the other sacraments.

Is there a more pastorally sensible solution to the priest-shortage in the United States than recruiting priests from countries with far greater needs?

Here again the answer is clear, but it is one that many of the church's pastoral leaders do not seem ready to face.

The Roman Catholic church (and readers will see momentarily why the adjective "Roman" is crucial here) can almost certainly increase the numbers of its priests if

- (a) it welcomed back into the priesthood those priests who left to marry and might still be willing to serve as married priests;
- (b) it dropped the requirement of life-long, obligatory celibacy for its priests, thereby matching the discipline of the non-Roman Catholic churches of the East, which have had a married priesthood for centuries; and
- (c) it opened the ordained priesthood to women.

Some Catholics, including many in the hierarchy, would have a theological, if not also a doctrinal, problem with the ordination of women, but there could be no theological or doctrinal objection to the ordination of married men, whether formerly active priests or not.

For most of its history, the Roman Catholic church had married priests -- and more than that, it had married bishops and married popes. Even today there are thousands of married Catholic priests, almost all of whom are in the various non-Roman Catholic churches of the East.

But the Roman Catholic church also has at least a few hundred married priests who have come over to the Catholic church from the Episcopal Church or from one of several Protestant churches. There is even a so-called Pastoral Provision to accommodate former priests of the Anglican Communion who wish not only to become Roman Catholics, but to serve the Roman Catholic church as married priests.

The Roman Catholic church, however, has been officially kinder to those coming into the church from non-Catholic churches than to its life-long Catholics who have served the church for many years as priests and whose only "sin" was to fall in love and to marry.

It is as if they must forever bear the mark of Cain, sentenced to a life of permanent exile from the priesthood.

When one reflects on the recent series in *The New York Times*, one can only wonder why the Roman Catholic church in the United States feels the need to recruit priests from regions of the world in far more desperate need, when there are men here at home who are willing and able to serve.

© 2009 Richard P. McBrien. All rights reserved. Fr. McBrien is the Crowley-O'Brien Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Source URL (retrieved on 07/20/2017 - 07:47): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/essays-theology/pastorally-sensible-solution-priest-shortage>