

Word



India

Ghana

India

Indonesia

**Vietnamese
American**

These young priests are
Divine Word Missionaries.
What makes them different
from “International priests”?
pages 2-3

Photo by Father James Pawlicki, SVD

INTERNATIONAL PRIESTS

by

Father Bernard Kwame Assenyoh, SVD

Numerous articles and even books have appeared in the last couple of years describing the phenomenon of "International Priests". International Priests are those priests from countries outside of the United States. The percentage of the priests who are foreign born has risen sharply in the last few years to such an extent that approximately 20% of Catholic Priests in this country come from other countries.

This phenomenon was recently the focus of the venerable *New York Times*. At the end of December 2008 the *New York Times* featured a three part article by Laurie Goodstein titled "Divine Recruits". For three consecutive days the story about the reliance of the US Roman Catholic church on foreign trained priests for needed pastoral work in US parishes was prominently featured.

Interestingly the priests and brothers of the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) were quick to point out at a recent meeting in Lafayette, Louisiana that though they came from India, Poland, Ghana, Indonesia, Vietnam they are different from the priests described in the article. I myself come from Ghana and I see the differences between a missionary and other international priests to be most noticeable. But first let us examine.....

What the article says

I find three salient points in the article.

First, the article suggests that the shortage of priests (diocesan) in the US church is not a myth but a reality that has led to the consolidation and closure of churches as well as the dwindling number of worshippers in the pews. This signals that the Roman Catholic church in general is still largely a "clerical-centered" church. Without ordained celibate ministerial and male priests there can be no Eucharist, and without the Eucharist there is certainly no Church.



Father Paul Kahan, SVD from Indonesia has worked amongst Hispanics and African Americans in Texas.

The second point is that the bishops are now embarking on a "drive to import foreign priests to compensate for a dearth of America." The article calls these imported foreign priests "international priests," and it is reported that currently there are about 300 international priests in **the USA. They are here in order that US Roman Catholic parishes remain open by celebrating the Eucharist, "anoint the sick and baptize babies. The article adds "few are prepared for the challenges of being a pastor in America."**



Father Alfred Ayem, SVD from Ghana ministers at St. Paul Church in New Orleans, Louisiana

Thirdly, Goodstein presents the views of many that, as a strategy, **the importation of "international priests" is neither a solution to the shortage of priests nor to the crisis into which this shortage plunges the whole Church.**

Why should we care?

The term "international priests" is not being used arbitrarily by the article. It corresponds to the goal that the recruiters have in mind for these "international priests" - sacramental work only! However, the crisis of the US Roman Catholic church is deeper than the celebration of Masses. The crisis is born of the social, economic, political and cultural contexts of the USA. Critics of the importation of priests suggest that "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." In the same vein, until we face the issues of injustice regarding race, gender, disability, class, immigration, and sexual orientation - all of which critically define the US cultural context - there cannot be a solution to the crisis. Recruiting international priests then for sacramental work only demonstrates either a denial or a misunderstanding of the problem that the church faces.

There is no doubt that flooding the church with international priests can offer stability in some parishes of the US church. In conservative churches, international priests flourish as conservatives' needs for the celebration of the sacraments only are met by the

DIFFERENT THAN MISSIONARIES

sacramental expertise and dogmatic training of most international priests. However, the pastoral challenge of the US context emerges from the issues listed above. Hence, although the sacramental needs are met, the socio-economic, political and cultural lives of the people are not addressed.

Therefore, there exists a disconnect between the sacraments and the lives of the people which continues to be deepened by the ministry of international priests. For example, a Kenyan priest working in the diocese of Owensboro, according to the article, is reported as saying that “he had an easier time relating to white Americans than African-Americans because he did not understand why blacks carried such resentments toward the United States.” Such a person, who happened to be an African and black priest, could only work and flourish in a rural white Roman Catholic parish like Saint Michael the Archangel in Oak Grove, KY. But he certainly has no clue about slavery and the church, civil rights, racism, black Catholicism, liberation theology or even African theology and inculturation. **Hence, inasmuch as international priests are limited to sacramental work, their ministry, in the long run, contribute to the church’s crisis in the USA. This further complicates the work of missionaries and indigenous religious leaders who seek to bridge the gap between the sacraments and life realities of the people.**



Father Sebastian Myladiyil, SVD from India ministers on the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

The Divine Word Missionaries seen on the front cover and these pages emphasize the differences between themselves and others who are recruited to serve in parishes in the United States. **The young missionaries point out that “wherever we find ourselves, as missionaries, we must engage the social, political, economic, and cultural context of the people we serve.”**

It is in this light that the notion or missionary model of “prophetic dialogue” is crafted. For example **if we have**



Fathers Emmanuel Tanu, SVD from Indonesia, Jaison Mangalath, SVD Pastor from India, and Father Anthony Anala, SVD from Ghana minister at Holy Ghost parish in Opelousas, Louisiana. Considered the largest African American parish in the USA parishioners have embraced the young men.

elected to serve among African Americans, we must not only celebrate Masses with them, but seek to engage their culture and their core concerns - issues of blackness, male-female relations, slavery, affirmative action, Afrocentricity, class, black religious expressions, representation, etc. Since we depend on foreign-born members, we must take the time to equip our members beyond the Eurocentric, dogmatic and initial formation in the seminaries. It is the ability to contextualize and inculturate that distinguishes the missionary from the international priest or minister.

Doesn’t it seem the primary question to be asked is what is the role of the Catholic priest? Do we just want ritual from him? Is all we want from our priests that they provide Sacramentals and say the Mass (often quickly) and we will see you next week? Or do we want something more? A priest who can bring the Word of God to make itself known in our daily lives and struggles? Do we not need to be challenged by the Word? If so then our priest leaders must engage the American culture and cross over to learn and share.

Until the time comes when the Church ordains women or allows a married clergy then we will be dependent on priests from other countries. African American parishes must challenge the young International Priest and provide him with the tools he will need to minister to our Churches.

If we do not then I fear the future will be bleak. There will be fewer African American Catholics and yes, the Bishops will close more of our parishes.

*Rev. Bernard Kwame Assenyoh, SVD has ministered in Louisiana. Presently he is a PhD Student at Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA
e mail to: b.kwame617@gmail.com*

in a word or two

The first NBCC Symposium on Development and Fundraising will take place May 28-30, 2009 in Indianapolis, Indiana.

The symposium is designed to give participants knowledge, confidence, and practical tools for sustaining ministry, school, or congregation. It is also a time to network with and learn from colleagues around the country who are engaged in the same ministries and financial challenges.

Core workshops will be taught by nationally renowned experts from The Fund Raising School and the Lake Institute on Faith and Giving, both at Indiana University's Center on Philanthropy.

Invited speakers are from the Black & Indian Missions, the Koch Foundation, and the National Leadership Roundtable on Church.

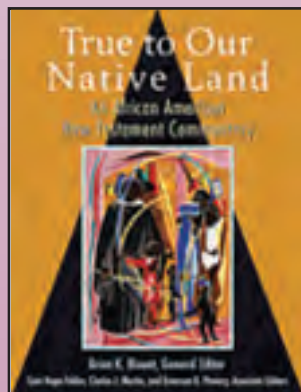
WHO SHOULD COME:

- Directors of Offices of Black/Multicultural Ministry
- Pastors of urban parishes
- Development officers or other leaders of Catholic religious congregations and schools
- Anyone seeking to develop and sustain a ministry in the Black Catholic community

For more program information go to the National Black Catholic Congress website www.nbccongress.org

You must be the change you wish to see in the world.

Mahatma Gandhi



True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary

is a valuable new resource from leading African American biblical scholars. This pioneering commentary sets biblical interpretation firmly in the context of African American experience and concern. Cutting-edge scholarship that is in tune with African

American churches calls into question many of the canons of traditional biblical research and highlights the role of the Bible in African American history, accenting themes of ethnicity, class, slavery, and African heritage as these play a role in Christian scripture and the Christian odyssey of an emancipated people.

The Catholic Archdiocese of New York has notified the 10 high schools it owns and operates that starting in September

each will become a financially independent entity responsible for its own budget and could no longer depend on the diocese.

Two of the best-known high schools in New York City are affected. These are Cardinal Hayes and Cardinal Spellman high schools. **A large portion of the enrollment of these schools is made up of African American and Hispanic students from the city's poorest neighborhoods.**

*The fruit of silence is prayer.
The fruit of prayer is faith.
The fruit of faith is love.
The fruit of love is service.
The fruit of service is peace.*

Mother Teresa

National efforts to provide health care coverage should be improved and expanded,

said Bishop William F. Murphy of Rockville Centre, New York, Chairman of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB).

Bishop Murphy called access to adequate health care a "basic human right" and protector of both human life and dignity in a letter to both houses of Congress.

"We strongly support significant increased funding to provide health care coverage to millions more low-income children, reducing the number of uninsured children by nearly half," Bishop Murphy said.

Bishop Murphy also expressed support for covering legal immigrant children and legal immigrant pregnant women by allowing states to cover children regardless of their date of entry into the country. He cited this as "the right thing to do" and noted its support from members of both parties. He added: "We urge your active and strong support for a children's health bill that respects the roles of families and protects the lives and health of our nation's children."

Congratulations to Bishop J. Terry Steib, SVD, Bishop of Memphis, Tennessee. He celebrates the 25th anniversary of his ordination as a Bishop on February 10, 2009.

Divine Word Missionaries is an international missionary community of over 6,000 brothers and priests. In 1905 the SVDs began working among African Americans in the Southern United States. Today, Divine Word Missionaries work in over 35 parishes in Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas and Arkansas.

IN A WORD is a publication of The Society of the Divine Word's Media Production Center. Rev. James Pawlicki, S.V.D., Director and Editor; Cathy Green-Miner, office manager; Paul Kahan, SVD.

All correspondence to Media Production Center, 199 Seminary Drive, Bay St. Louis, MS 39520, 228-467-1097, FAX 228-466-5640 Cell phone 504-908-6343. Electronic messages to our Internet address, editor@inaword.com.

IN A WORD is not published during July and August.
Web page can be found at <http://www.inaword.com>