

INTERNATIONAL PRIESTS IN AMERICA

International Priests in America

Challenges and Opportunities

Dean R. Hoge
and
Aniedi Okure, O.P.



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Foreword

In 1965 the United States changed the immigration law that allowed for people from Asia and Latin America to enter the United States in unprecedented numbers. The two coasts experienced an explosion of new immigrants. The immigrants' social and institutions have been working hard to meet the needs of these new communities ever since. Over the years the new wave of immigrants has reached even into the heartland.

The church knows the struggles of these new immigrants. It has played a major role in helping them to settle in this country, much in the same way that it helped the European immigrants in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

What the church was not prepared for was the phenomenon of fewer clergy here in the United States, challenging its ability to minister to well-established Catholic communities as well as to the new immigrant population. The traditional clergy of the United States have found themselves scrambling to meet the needs of the diverse faith communities.

Gradually the church has seen growing numbers of new immigrant clergy taking positions in Catholic churches across the United States as pastors, associates, and extern clergy. Questions have arisen about the nature of this phenomenon. Are priests born in other countries here to serve their own immigrant people, as was the pattern of the European immigrant clergy? Are they here to evangelize and be on mission to an American population in need of a new evangelization? Have they come in response to fewer priestly vocations in the United States? What is their effectiveness? How are they received? Is this a pastoral solution to the problem of fewer priests? These and many other questions have arisen with the growing numbers of foreign-born priests beginning to serve the Catholic population of the United States.

For many years this situation has caused concern for the National Federation of Priests' Councils. In the fall of 2000 the federation sponsored a symposium that sought to consider the reality of international priests and to surface issues and questions that were swirling around it. The study and its commentaries presented in this book were occasioned by that symposium.

The National Federation of Priests' Councils is pleased to present this study for the consideration of the Catholic community as it seeks to understand itself in the new reality of a globally oriented church in the United States. We are extremely grateful to Dr. Dean Hoge and Father Aniedi Okure for their tireless efforts on behalf of this project. It is sure to be a major contribution to the pastoral life of the Catholic Church in the United States at the beginning of this third millennium.

Rev. Robert J. Silva
President, The National Federation of Priests' Councils

Preface

As the Catholic Church in America brings in more and more international priests to serve in the United States, debate is spreading about if and how this should be done. Criticisms, proposals, and suggestions are being heard on all sides of the issues, and they commonly call for more research and information.

The National Federation of Priests' Councils, in responding to these voices, held symposia in 2001 and 2002 on international priests in America. As a result, it decided to commission new research and suggested that the first project should be a depiction of the existing situation and the attitudes of priests and laity today. It preferred to limit attention to the international priests whose ministry in the United States began in 1985 or later. The 1985 cutoff meant that new research would look solely at the most recent arrivals rather than reviewing the earlier international priests, largely Irish, who arrived in the forties, fifties, and sixties.

Accordingly, the target group to be studied was defined as all priests born overseas (including Puerto Rico) whose ministry in the United States began in 1985 or later. Priests who are students, educators, or administrators are included if they engage in sacramental ministry. Dean Hoge was asked to begin the research process.

Work began in 2002 with pilot studies to see if a reliable list of international priests could be compiled and if everyone involved—foreign-born priests, American priests, vicars, personnel boards, and lay ministers—would cooperate with the surveys and interviews we would need. Father Aniedi Okure was then added to the project.

This book is our report. We have spent two years surveying dioceses and religious institutes about their policies, then surveying a sample of international priests about their experiences and recommendations. In the past year we have talked with a hundred key persons personally and by phone; eighty-seven of the interviews were taped and transcribed. We also held three focus groups. The process is described in the Appendix.

As soon as we started, we discovered that we were in the middle of a swirling discussion on several levels. Our interviews led to broad-ranging

questions about ministry, vocations, missions, and finances. We were not in any position to take stands on ecclesiological questions; we defined our task as social science analysis, not theological judgment. Our job was to gather data and listen to recommendations from all sides, then to convey them in print.

This book, therefore, states the issues as clearly and fairly as possible without attempting to settle them. If the reader feels a lack of closure in what we offer here, it is because today there is a lack of closure in the church. We left it to the four commentators at the end of the book, persons selected as wise and capable voices of the church, to spell out the implications of the findings.

We co-authors brought years of experience to this project. Dean Hoge has carried out (in collaboration with others) five surveys of American priests in the last two decades; the results have been published in articles and books, mainly *The Future of Catholic Leadership: Responses to the Priest Shortage* (1987), *The First Five Years of the Priesthood* (2002), and *Evolving Visions of the Priesthood* (2003). Father Aniedi Okure, O.P., served as coordinator of ethnic ministries at the United States Catholic Conference from 1995 to 2001, during which time his main task was gathering information and opinions about international priests and religious, organizing orientation workshops, and serving as staff writer for the book *Guidelines for Receiving Pastoral Ministers in the United States*. We have formed our own opinions about the various issues, but for the most part we have kept our views to ourselves. Only in the final chapter do we state a few of our conclusions.

From the beginning we saw that we were dealing basically with two issues. First, should the Catholic Church in the United States bring in more international priests in future years? Second, with the assumption that for better or worse some will be brought in, how should this be done in a way that furthers the ministry of the priests and advances the mission of the church? We have structured the book to address these two issues. The first part of the book is on the debate about *if* we should bring in more foreign-born priests, and the second part is on *how* this should be done.

The first chapter introduces the present-day situation by reviewing the history of international priests in the United States. Chapter 2 describes the international priests serving in the United States in 2004. Chapter 3 analyzes the global brain drain and the worldwide distribution of priests. Chapters 4 and 5 set forth arguments about whether America should continue to bring in international priests. Chapter 6 continues the topic by looking more precisely at the motivations of international priests who come here.

Chapter 7 is devoted to conveying the feelings of international priests in our interviews and focus groups. Chapter 8 takes up questions of screening

candidates, language training, cultural sensitivity, and finances. Chapter 9 presents information on programs of acculturation now being offered by dioceses and religious institutes. Chapter 10 states a few conclusions and reports the recommendations we gathered from the international priests, American priests, vicars, and lay leaders.

We asked four leaders of the American Catholic Church to read the first draft of our report and write commentaries from their points of view.

D. H. and A. O.

Acknowledgments

This project could not have been completed without the help of many persons. From the beginning we were encouraged by the national leaders of the National Federation of Priests' Councils, especially the president, Bob Silva, and two administrators, first Bernard Stratman and later Vic Doucette. We had two meetings of an advisory committee, which included Robert Silva, Vic Doucette, Cletus Kiley, Anthony McGuire, and Eugene Hemrick. Allan Deck, Kenneth McGuire, Eduardo Fernandez, Kathryn Pierce, John Kemper, Anthony Dao, Bernard Stratman, and Boguslaw Augustyn that gave us extensive help and advice. Our surveys of dioceses, institutes, and international priests were carried out with the extensive help of Florencio Riguera. Florencio also carried out most of the data handling. We were assisted in interviewing by Eugene Hemrick, and transcribing was done by Lele Yang, Xiaofan Li, Florence Cole, and Claudia Penn. Library assistance was offered by Hannah Simon and Merlyn Kettering. Other research assistants were Jacqueline Wenger and Tom Norton. Financial support was provided by a grant from the Louisville Institute for the Study of American Religion and from an anonymous donor. We thank all these people.

The project was commissioned by the National Federation of Priests' Councils, but they are not responsible for the outcome; we authors bear that responsibility. We pray that the project will help the church carry out its God-given mission.

Chapter 1

International Priests in American History

The Catholic Church in the United States has always had international priests serving its parishes, and in most of its history it depended on them. Only in one short period, from about 1940 to 1960, did Americans produce enough homegrown priests. The rest of the time foreign priests were present in great numbers, and at times dominated the church.

In the pre-revolutionary period Catholics were few in number in the colonies, and there were few priests. Religious priests dominated, mainly Jesuits. In the 1780s, after the Revolutionary War, there were only twenty-one priests in the entire nation—nineteen in Maryland and two in Pennsylvania (Perko 1989, 99). In 1791 French Sulpicians, a society of diocesan priests, began arriving, and they had a major influence. They worked in parishes and in missions, and they established the first seminary in the new nation, St. Mary's in Baltimore (Perko 1989, 107–08).

The early Catholic communities in the United States produced very few native-born priests. In 1791, at the first church synod, held in Baltimore, 80 percent of the clergy present were foreign-born. French priests were the most common, and for the most part, the French priests were refugees seeking asylum during the French Revolution. These men, and indeed most of the European priests, tended to be suspicious of republican tendencies in America and preferred to reproduce the European church here (Dolan 1985, 118–20).

The American bishops needed to look to Europe for priests, and they did so at every opportunity. They wrote their friends and confreres in Europe and sent recruiters to European seminaries to try to attract new priests to come to the United States. They met with some success, since French and Irish seminaries had a surplus of graduates. For instance, in 1835, Simon Brute, the first bishop of St. Louis, traveled to France, and in 1836 he returned with eleven priests, two deacons, two subdeacons, three men in minor orders, and two other ecclesiastical students (Ellis 1971, 17).

Not all of the immigrant priests in those earlier years were ministerial successes. Many were inspiring contributors to church growth, but others

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were simply troublemakers (Hennessy 1981, 91). The letters of early American bishops are filled with complaints about the priests from Europe. There were mainly two complaints. First, as already mentioned, the European priests preferred a more hierarchical, less republican-style church than the Americans did, and they could not understand the American separation of church and state.

Second, many of the foreign-born priests were unable to get along with their religious superior or bishop. Some were “freelance” clerics who came to America on their own. The American bishops complained to their European colleagues that due to the shortage, they were forced to accept almost any priest, but they found out that many priests who came here were misfits and malcontents back in their home countries. The archbishop of Baltimore, in an 1819 letter to the Holy See, stated that out of the ten Irish priests who came to his diocese, eight had turned out badly (Gannon 1971, 304). European bishops sometimes viewed America as a kind of a dumping ground for wayward priests. This tendency, as we might expect, did not endear them to the bishops in America (Morris 1997, 129).

In the Southwest the problem of the shortage of priests was the same as in the East. A few priests came in from Mexico, but many more were needed, and French priests were invited. This solved one problem but produced another: tensions arose between the fairly relaxed Hispanic Catholic laity and the more religiously rigorous French clergy (Perko 1989, 194).

Regardless of these problems, a great many foreign priests became bishops in the United States. At the second plenary council, held at Baltimore in 1866, thirty of the forty-seven bishops present were foreign-born (Hennessy 1981, 160). Dolan describes the dominance of foreign-born priests in the nineteenth century:

Throughout the nineteenth century, the vast majority of these [priest] recruits were foreign-born; the few studies of the clergy that have been done illustrate this very clearly. In Minnesota, for example, nine out of ten priests, between 1844 and 1880, were foreigners; in the next thirty years the ratio dropped off to two out of three, but this was still a very high percentage. . . . In St. Louis a similar pattern prevailed at the turn of the century, with over half of the clergy being immigrants. Reflecting the nationality of the people, the vast majority of these priests, at least 70 percent in Minnesota, were Irish and Germans. (1992, 170)

Whereas priests came from various European nations, including France, Germany, and Italy, the vast majority came from Ireland.

The Coming of the Irish

The large Irish immigration beginning in the 1830s brought with it a wave of Irish priests. Ireland in the nineteenth century had an abundance of priests, and the bishops directed thousands of seminary graduates to go into mission work—above all, in the United States, but also in Canada, England, Scotland, and Australia. By the end of the nineteenth century, Irish priests were the most common foreign-born priests in the United States. About four thousand came between 1840 and today. Most were diocesan, not religious, priests and most served in the South and the West. Americans dubbed them the “F.B.I.”—the “Foreign-Born Irish.” Florida and California had large concentrations. William Smith cites statistics:

By the mid-1800s, 59 percent of the priests in the diocese of New York were Irish-born and at the beginning of the twentieth century, 62 percent of the bishops were Irish-American, more than half of them being Irish-born. By 1900 two-thirds of the diocesan priests in the diocese of St. Paul, Minnesota, were foreign-born with more than one-quarter of them being Irish. One-third of the pastors in the Archdiocese of San Francisco in 1963 were born and educated in Ireland, while during the 1940s and 1950s, 80 percent of the priests in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles were Irish-born. (2004, 14)

Irish priests were readily available, since the seminaries produced more than could be placed, and the bishops in Ireland simply assigned many young men to minister overseas. Not all who went to other nations liked ministering there, and some returned to Ireland as quickly as they could. Others grew fond of their adopted land and stayed their entire lives. America, especially, offered more opportunities and more possibilities of parish growth. Also, priests in America were promoted to become pastors much more quickly than in Ireland. American bishops were appreciative, but there are some indications in their papers that they suspected they were not getting the best from the Irish seminaries (Smith 2004, 22).

Wherever the Irish priests served, they were directed to serve all ethnic groups, and soon they were presiding over parishes of Bohemians, Slovaks, Italians, and Portuguese. They acquired a reputation of being more rigorous and disciplined than priests from Italy, Spain, or Portugal. The laity from these nations preferred their own priests whenever they could find one (Morris 1997, 129).

Monsignor William Barry, an Irish priest in south Florida in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, was an example of how Irish priests helped one another.

For over thirty years he held a card game for Irish priests on Sunday evenings. It has been noted that some clergy believed the Irish priests were clanish and that this hindered ties with native-born clergy. If the Irish priests

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were indeed clannish this is just one example of maintaining a subcultural identity. Sharing activities on free days, annual visits to Ireland, and annual seminary reunions held in the United States were other means by which these priests reinforced their Irish identity. (Smith 2004, 69)

Smith's Survey of Irish Priests

William Smith in 1997 carried out an important survey of Irish-born and Irish-educated diocesan priests serving in the United States. He estimated that about 1,250 Irish-born priests were serving in the United States. He collected names of alumni of Irish seminaries who were in the United States, and 402 of them returned his questionnaires. Their mean age was 62.

Why had they come to the United States? Forty-three percent said they were assigned by their bishops to come here, while 57 percent had volunteered for service in an American diocese, usually because they had not been chosen by an Irish bishop for sponsorship in a seminary (Smith 2004, 75). This means that virtually all had been forced to leave Ireland or to seek support from outside Ireland for their seminary training. Were they treated differently by American Catholics because they were from Ireland? Fifty-one percent said yes:

The priests were treated differently by non-Catholics and by other priests, particularly American-born priests. Time and time again in their answers the Irish priests mentioned the animosity held by American-born priests toward them. (2004, 84–85)

Here are typical comments by Smith's respondents:

My opinion is that most parishioners in American parishes, at least in the Southeastern dioceses, would prefer an Irish priest to an American priest. I suspect the reason for it is that the Irish are more pastoral, less bureaucratic, more personal, less rational/academic. Of course it's quite chic in academe and among American women religious to be anti-Irish, but not so among ordinary parishioners. Being thus favored has its disadvantages however. Some Irish priests play the "Irish ticket" to a shameful degree, substituting charm for substance. (2004, 86)

The people in parishes have been wonderful. Our biggest difficulty in the beginning was with the native clergy. They seemed to resent us, particularly if we got a promotion. Sometimes Americans of Irish descent may favor Irish-born priests, but generally speaking I do not think I am treated differently.

The parishioners have been wonderful to me over the past forty-three years, no matter what nationality they happen to be. Unfortunately and sadly the same cannot be said about some native priests. We were "outsiders" when we came. This feeling is still present among some of the present generation. (2004, 87)

The Irish priests were overwhelmingly happy in their priesthood. Smith asked them about problems they were facing, and the main problems were overwork, loneliness, celibacy, and the shortage of clergy. Yet on balance they had high morale.

Smith concluded that the often-heard description today of F.B.I.'s in the United States—that they are ultraconservative—is unwarranted by the facts. Yes, they have been conservative on personal moral issues such as sex and marriage, but not on everything. Also, the view that Irish priests came to America reluctantly is unwarranted; the vast majority came willingly, with a strong sense of mission and hope for new possibilities here (2004, 118). True, many were homesick, and many found American ways difficult to accept. But the majority served with devotion, energy, and openness. They left a strong legacy of progressive activism with immigrants and labor unions.

As a postscript to this depiction of Irish-born priests, we should note that the heroic twentieth-century Irish era of missionary priests has ended. It is finished. Vocations dropped precipitously in Ireland in the 1980s and 1990s, and today the seminaries in Ireland no longer produce even enough priests for the Irish church. All but two seminaries in Ireland have closed due to lack of students (Smith 2004, 4). In 1997 there were only 119 seminarians preparing for the priesthood in Ireland. This sudden collapse of vocations was part of a broader breakdown of church authority in Ireland. Apparently underlying social pressures had been building in Ireland for several decades and had only been waiting for favorable political events to have an effect.

The Mid-Twentieth Century

The chronic shortage of American priests eased in the 1940s and 1950s. By this time American seminaries were well developed and filled with students. But American Catholics today often mistakenly take the immediate pre-Vatican II years—the forties and fifties—as representing all past history. No, those decades were unusual. They can be seen as a final golden age of the immigrant church, full of vigor and hope, well supplied with native-born seminarians. The longer-term American past saw shortages of American seminarians and endless efforts to recruit priests from Europe. The ratios of priests to laypersons from 1900 until today are shown in Table 1.1. American Catholicism had more priests in service, relative to laity, in 1940 and 1950 than at any time before or since. Since the 1970s the shortage of priests has intensified. An outcome of this history is that older American Catholics today remember the 1940s and 1950s and compare today with that blessed age when priests were everywhere.

Table 1.1
Ratio of Priests to Laypeople, 1900–2004

Year	Number of Priests	Millions of Catholics	Ratio of Priests to Laypeople
1900	11,987	12	1:1,001
1910	16,550	16	1:967
1920	21,019	20	1:951
1930	27,864	20	1:718
1940	35,839	22	1:614
1950	43,889	29	1:661
1960	54,682	42	1:768
1970	58,161	48	1:825
1980	58,398	50	1:856
1990	53,088	59	1:1,111
2000	45,699	60	1:1,313
2004	43,304	64	1:1,478

Data from Gerald Shaughnessy, *Has the Immigrant Kept the Faith?* (New York: Arno Press and *The New York Times* [1925] 1969); *Official Catholic Directory*, annual eds. (New Providence, NJ: P. J. Kenedy). Includes diocesan and religious priests.

Americans also seem to believe that this country has always been a source of missionaries to the rest of the world. We have encountered American Catholics who assume that this country has always been a resource for the growth of world Catholicism, including its ability to send priests to the world; therefore they feel embarrassed that today the United States needs to receive foreign priests to satisfy its own priestly needs. It is felt as a humiliation or loss of face. They ask: “How did it happen that our nation, which [they assume] has always given priests to missions to the poor countries, now needs to receive priests from those very same countries? What happened?”

This sentiment, although widespread, is based on myth and not fact, and it impedes the receptivity of foreign-born priests by many laypersons. People ask: “Why are they here? Aren’t they needed in the mission fields?” A clarification of the facts, namely, that America has from the beginning relied on international priests, would help overcome this troublesome myth.

Throughout the 1980s pressures built up in American dioceses, due to the shortage of priests, to bring in more from overseas. Dioceses tried one thing

and another. For example, in the early 1980s the Diocese of Rockville Centre became a leader in inviting Third World priests, and it incardinated forty-two international priests. Yet problems that created opposition emerged. The incoming priests often had serious problems with the English language, and they lacked knowledge of American culture. In 1986 the diocese, even though it faced a continuing priest shortage, decided to stop incardinating priests from other nations. As the director of personnel at the time said, “We get too much flak from our people, who can’t understand them” (Hoge 1987, 118). The diocese instead put its energy into training lay ministers for parish leadership.

The 1999 Guidelines of the American Bishops

By the middle 1990s enough difficulties had arisen over international priests that the Bishops’ Committee on Migration began an investigation and wrote a book of recommendations entitled *Guidelines for Receiving Pastoral Ministers in the United States*, published in 1999. The staff person in charge of producing the book was Aniedi Okure, O.P., a co-author of the present book. The forty-six-page report discussed the most vexing problems and how they could be alleviated. It begins by reciting the “difficulties” in the process of bringing in priests at the time—selection of candidates, processing immigration papers, determining the terms of service, providing orientation, finding suitable jobs and housing, making educational arrangements, and so on. It makes three overall recommendations: (a) the international priest needs an orientation to America before leaving home; (b) he needs at least two to three months to adjust to American society and culture before beginning his ministry here; and (c) he needs to get a letter of agreement or contract with the receiving bishop, specifying his position, salary, and benefits.

Regarding the process of recruiting, the report recommends that the American bishop make a written request to the diocesan bishop or major superior in the foreign country. Then the bishop or superior must nominate a specific priest and must vouch for his health, ability, experience, and character. The American bishop must state clearly that the priest will not be dependent on supplemental employment or solicitation of funds for his support during his stay in the United States, and he should state his diocese’s policy regarding fundraising by individual priests. The receiving bishop and the priest should come to an understanding that the latter has come to serve the whole church and will not be relegated to serving only those who speak his native language.

Taking these measures would reduce the number of “freelance” priests who find their own way to the United States and then hunt around for a

bishop who will take them, and it would reduce misunderstandings about finances and assignments.

The report recommends good orientation programs for the priests. Orientation lasting several days should take place in the country of origin and be devoted to providing information about American society. After the priest arrives in the United States, he should be given two to three months for initial adjustment, during which time the diocese should help him develop a personal support network of both native and foreign-born clergy, and he should enroll in classes in spoken English. He should be assigned a mentor for a period of at least three years. Twelve to eighteen months after arrival, another training program should be offered, covering the history of the American church, ministry in a multicultural church, the role of lay ministers, and other topics.

Some recommendations about orientation programs were specific. Large dioceses should sponsor their own orientation programs, normally once a year. Small dioceses with very few international priests should join with other dioceses or sponsor a shorter program. The initial orientation program should contain at least sixteen hours of program time, possibly over two to four days. It should cover practical topics, including bank accounts, driver's licenses, immigration status, shopping, social security, telephone, social norms such as tipping and table manners, gender rules, American holidays, sports, life in a rectory or religious community, expectations of the laity in a parish, diocesan rules, and professional boundaries.

In the six years since the *Guidelines* came out, the rules have been followed by more and more dioceses, according to reports from everyone we talked to. Today very few foreign-born priests are coming to the United States without explicit permission from their sending bishops or superiors, and agreements between the sending bishops or superiors and the receiving bishops are usually written out. In addition, since September 11, 2001, American immigration rules have tightened, making it more difficult and cumbersome to bring in priests. The process of bringing in international priests became much more regulated in the last four years. The development of orientation programs, however, is a task largely unfinished.

Vatican Instructions Regarding International Priests

The Vatican has recently issued several instructions regarding international priests. In 1980 Pope John Paul II issued "Norms for the Distribution of Priests," which asks that affluent nations share their priests with poorer nations and with mission territories.

In a 1990 encyclical entitled *Redemptoris Missio*, Pope John Paul II reiterated the need for more priests to serve in mission areas. Specifically,

he encouraged bishops to offer some of their priests for temporary service in Africa.

In 2001 the Vatican Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples issued norms governing diocesan priests serving abroad. These norms were written to counter a growing trend of priests moving from developing nations to Europe or North America for further studies or for special ministerial service, then to remain there and never go home. The reasons why priests from developing nations wanted to go abroad were well known and clearly stated in the document. Priests are motivated, in part, to move to wealthy nations for the economic opportunities there. The result is that too many priests move to Europe or North America to study, then make themselves available to the local bishops and soon overextend their stay, hoping to remain permanently. A certain number of them defy the commands of their home bishop to return to their native country. The sending bishops, due to the long distances and poor communication, in effect lose control of those priests.

The 2001 norms state that from now on, bishops in mission countries should choose the priests they will send abroad to pursue further studies. The bishops should designate the field of study for the priest, the faculty in which he will study, and the date of his definite return. A written agreement must be made between the bishop and the overseas institution in which the priest is to study, including clarification of his financial support. The receiving bishop is obligated to provide spiritual assistance to the priest, including help in incorporating him into the life of the presbyterate (Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples 2001, arts. 1–7). These Vatican norms of 2001 were an attempt to counteract irregular and under-the-radar movements of priests from nation to nation.

This review of American history and of some Catholics' erroneous memories of that history will help us interpret the research on international priests today. The next chapter looks at the new studies.