

## LATEST NEWS

### Classes preach pronunciation to foreign-born priests 🗣️

Accent-cutting classes help foreign-born clergy spread their message

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One recent morning at the Cathedral Shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe, some Dallas-area priests were busy minding their p's and q's – as well as their t's, w's and r's.

The Rev. Roberto Butawan was working on mastering the "th" sound. Although he was taught English as a child in the Philippines, he's now trying to learn how to talk like an American.

It's a challenging task, but one that's vital to his calling.

"I need to be understood," said Father Butawan, who serves at the Prince of Peace Catholic Community in Plano. "Being a missionary, the primary task is to preach and to bring the Gospel of Christ to the people."

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He's part of an "accent reduction" class that's being offered by Dallas diocese for the growing number of foreign-born priests who are making up for a shortage of homegrown clergymen.

Currently, 46 out of the 111 priests serving in Dallas-area parishes are from foreign countries, and the number is likely to grow.

In the past, priests have followed the waves of Catholic immigrants to American shores. But now, the Father Flanagans are increasingly being replaced by Father Nguyens and Father Moonjanattus.

Among the international priests serving in Dallas-area parishes, most are from the Philippines, India, Mexico and Central and South America. Six are from Spain, and four are from Vietnam.

"Over the last 10 to 15 years we've seen a greater influx of foreign-born priests into this country," said Mary Edlund, chancellor of the Catholic Diocese of Dallas. "They come with their unique stories, background, culture and experiences that enrich the communities here. Our help with accent reduction is a way to assist their communities so their stories can be understood."

Help in the pulpit

The program is the brainchild of Richardson resident James O'Malley, who provided initial funding in the memory of his wife, who died a year ago.

"When she passed away, I wanted to do something in her name," he said of the Mary Jane O'Malley Memorial Accent Reduction Program.

Several years ago, the couple began having difficulties understanding the homilies delivered by foreign-born priests at

various churches they attended.

"On a one-to-one basis, it's easier to understand them," Mr. O'Malley said. "But in the pulpit, when they're preaching, it's difficult to follow."

Catholics throughout the country may be having similar difficulties as priests from foreign shores fill empty pulpits.

From 1965 to 2006, the number of U.S. priests fell from 58,632 to 41,792, while the Catholic population soared from 45.6 million to 64 million, according to Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate.

As parishes without resident priest pastors climbed from 549 to 3,405 over the past four decades, the Roman Catholic Church has filled the gap by combining parishes, relying more heavily on lay leaders and importing priests.

A 1999 survey found that 16 percent of American priests were born outside the United States, said Mary Bendyna, executive director of the Georgetown research center.

The number is likely to grow. A recent survey of seminarians scheduled to be ordained this year found that one-third of the respondents were from abroad.

Shortage worse here

The severity of the priest shortage varies throughout the country, said Brian Schmisek, director of the Institute for Religious and Pastoral Studies at the University of Dallas.

Historically Catholic areas on the East Coast, for example, aren't experiencing as severe a shortage as places like Dallas, where the Catholic population has mushroomed from 200,000 to more than a million in the past two decades.

"It's because people are moving here from other parts of the country," Dr. Schmisek said. "There's a higher percentage of Catholics in the Dallas area than ever before."

He thinks programs to help non-native priests overcome their thick accents will become more common as their numbers continue to grow.

He tells of one parishioner who wrote to her bishop, asking why he had sent a Spanish-speaking priest to her rural diocese.

"He didn't have the heart to tell her that he wasn't speaking Spanish, he was speaking English," said Mr. Schmisek, who relates the story to illustrate the growing communication problem.

"Many Anglos are not used to listening to foreign accents," he said. "Parishioners have been saying to bishops, 'We love our priests, but we can't understand them.'"

That was the situation facing Mr. O'Malley last year when he read an article in *The Dallas Morning News* about a Farmers Branch company that was helping non-native speakers shed their accents.

Karen Yates, owner of Global English Training, had created a linguistic mimicry technique that helped foreigners learn the cadence, idioms, body and facial language and intonations of the American tongue. Her clients included individuals and corporate clients such as Frito-Lay and Johnson & Johnson.

Mr. O'Malley thought the program was just the ticket to help area priests learn to talk like their parishioners.

"They know English, but they really haven't gotten away from the accents that make it difficult to follow them when they're preaching," he said.

Mr. O'Malley pitched the idea in a June 2006 letter to Bishop Charles Grahmann, who then headed the Dallas Diocese. Mr. O'Malley even offered \$10,000 to launch the program.

While it's almost impossible for most people to completely eliminate their native accents, "we make sure listeners can understand what they're saying," said Ms. Yates, whose technique is being used in a 13-week program at the downtown cathedral.

No easy task

Priests come from Plano, Dallas, McKinney, Duncanville and other area cities to attend the weekly class taught by Meagan Cockram.

"The three couples are going to throw a big party," Ms. Cockram said, as the clergymen from various countries repeat the sentence. They exaggerate the "th" sound, trying not to pronounce it as a "t."

While it may sound like child's play, it's no easy task. For non-native speakers, American English can seem to be an endless series of inconsistencies and random speech patterns.

Ms. Cockram repeated the word "liturgy," noting that the "t" is pronounced more like a "d." Then came the word "liturgical" with its crisp "t" sound. The "t" sound almost disappears in the name "Martin," she noted.

"I wonder if that is a weeping willow tree," repeated the Rev. Augusthy Thekemailadyil, following Ms. Cockram's lead. He was asked to repeat the word "tree" until he could do it without rolling the "r." After a few tries, his tongue learned the unfamiliar sound.

He thinks he's making progress. "I had a local teacher in my parish help me with my pronouncements," said the Indian-born priest. "This class is more systematic."

The "accent reduction" program is already having an impact at one McKinney congregation.

The Rev. Peter Tuan Le, who serves at St. Gabriel the Archangel Catholic Community, was enrolled in the first series of classes last year.

When the Vietnamese-born priest started at the church a year ago, his accent made it difficult to understand his homilies and Scripture readings, parishioner John McNamara recalled.

"He's improved immeasurably," Mr. McNamara said. "The clarity, pace and pronunciation is much improved."

Mr. McNamara thinks these types of classes are vital because priests may not realize there's a communication barrier with their flocks.

"Most people won't go up to a priest and say, 'You're not speaking clearly,' " Mr. McNamara said. "You have a tendency to skirt around those issues so you won't offend a priest."