

A WORLD OF GIFTS

Priests from other countries bringing unique charisms

By DEBRA HAMPTON

Extern priests serving in the Diocese of Dallas bring gifts unique to their cultures that enhance the lives of parishioners, said chancellor Mary Edlund. Currently, there are 32 extern priests — meaning they come from another diocese — who serve here. Externs account for 16 percent of the total number of priests in the Diocese of Dallas.



Edlund

“The priests who come here from other parts of the world offer us a different model of the church,” Edlund said. “As each one shares his life experience we see that they have very unique stories.”

They also bring unique charisms in their sense of piety and devotion, and those are often manifested in ways that reflect their cultures.

Current research by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) shows that 7,000 international priests have worked in the United States since 1985 with an estimated 5,500 serving now across the country. They are coming from Vietnam, Mexico, the Philippines, Nigeria, Poland, India and other nations throughout Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe.

For some of the priests, their mission in their home country has been evangelization, especially in areas where people are unchurched. And often this work, such as in India, has been undertaken in rural, impover-

ished conditions.

“When they come to the Diocese of Dallas, they find themselves in the midst of affluence,” Edlund said. “Even in the more modest parishes here, they have more resources than where they came from. At the same time, when they tell their stories that exemplify Christ’s call to them, it helps our communities witness the global church. Their stories are really gifts to our people.”

There are challenges for the priests, too, and they go beyond language. “Some of the priests have never been to the United States before,” Edlund said, “and they have never seen our way of life. It is radically different for many of them.”

Coming from Mexico, Colombia, India and other countries, the largest number of extern priests in the Diocese of Dallas comes from the Philippines. What is the process for being sponsored by the diocese? Many of the foreign dioceses are aware of the priest shortages in the United States, Edlund said. “Our policy has been to rely on priests already functioning here in the diocese who have a personal relationship with a priest in another diocese,” she said. “We rely on them to do the recruiting.”

Once an extern priest has been recommended, there are criminal background checks that the diocese conducts and required documentation is sought, such as a certificate of ordination and reference checks.

Once the paperwork has been completed a sponsor letter is sent to the U.S. embassy in the priest’s respective country so that a religious visa may be obtained. Often the process can take up to six months, but sometimes “it can be shorter or longer,” Edlund said.

An accreditation board interviews

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TC photo by Robert Bunch

Meagan Cochram instructs cathedral rector Father Eduardo Gonzalez as Father Edison Vela looks on.

Classes help bridge communication gap

By DEBRA HAMPTON

How do you say “God?” For six priests in the Diocese of Dallas, the question has taken on new meaning.

They are participating in classes that help foreign-born priests more clearly and understandably speak English. The course, which began in early October and ends in mid-January, aims at accent reduction so that the priests, who are assigned to various parishes throughout the diocese, will be able to deliver homilies and communicate with their parishioners more effectively.

From places such as the Philippines, India, Ecuador, Colombia, Mexico and Vietnam, “they help each other a lot,” said Meagan Cochram, a linguist who works for Global English Training.

“We laugh over pronunciation,” she said. “They think the ‘th’ sound is the funniest because you have to stick your tongue out.”

In a recent class, the priests asked the correct way to pronounce God, “the most important word,” and that elicited a laugh from all. Other words that came up: the right way to say “Eucharist” and “contrition.”

A “very jovial, motivated group to work with,” according to Cochram, the priests are working on an overview of pronunciation, on rhythm and on word stress. Each week they bring in words and phrases that are corrected in their speech by people they are in contact with.

While this is the first time Dallas-based Global English Training has taught priests, the company has worked with academics, military mechanics and professional sports players.

Cochram, a Catholic who began volunteering in a literacy program at age 15 in her Fort Smith, Ark., parish, has found herself at home teaching the class that goes beyond pronunciation to all those things that are non-verbal but definitely a part of communication skills.

“We are constantly discussing cultural do’s and don’ts,” Cochram said. “For example, Americans are not as direct as other cultures. We are more preoccupied with the impact of what we say rather than what we say. Gestures — this last week we worked on non-verbal listening cues that parallel intonation. Although most Americans don’t realize it, it’s common to raise our eyebrows while making a good point, or even while pronouncing words at the highest intonation point in the sentence,” she said. “This is very subtle, but it is an important listening cue that makes the speaker easier to understand.”

The class meets for three hours each week and teaches standard American English that would be associated with the mid-Atlantic states.

“We focus on the speech patterns such as those exhibited by newscasters from CNN — someone with a standard English accent, an accent that you can’t identify as being a California accent or Midwestern,” said Cochram and Karen Yates, who is the owner of Global English Training. “We focus on a very neutral accent.”

The program began as the result of letters and an ensuing conversation between a Richardson parishioner, James O’Malley, and diocesan officials. O’Malley and his deceased wife, Jane, had experienced a number of homilies in which he said they

literally couldn’t understand what was being said.

O’Malley, a Serran and a fourth-degree Knight of Columbus, decided to do something in his wife’s memory that would not only make a difference to him personally but also to many Catholics here.

Giving \$10,000 in seed money, O’Malley sees the program as an extension of his involvement in Serra International.

“In Serra we pray for new vocations and for perseverance of priests and nuns,” he said. “This is something the Serrans should be interested in — making sure that foreign-born priests are able to communicate with parishioners.”

Eventually, the priests will work on their skills in delivering a homily. The facilitators at Global English Training are quick to point out that the challenges have as much to do with the way Americans hear as much as the way the priests speak.

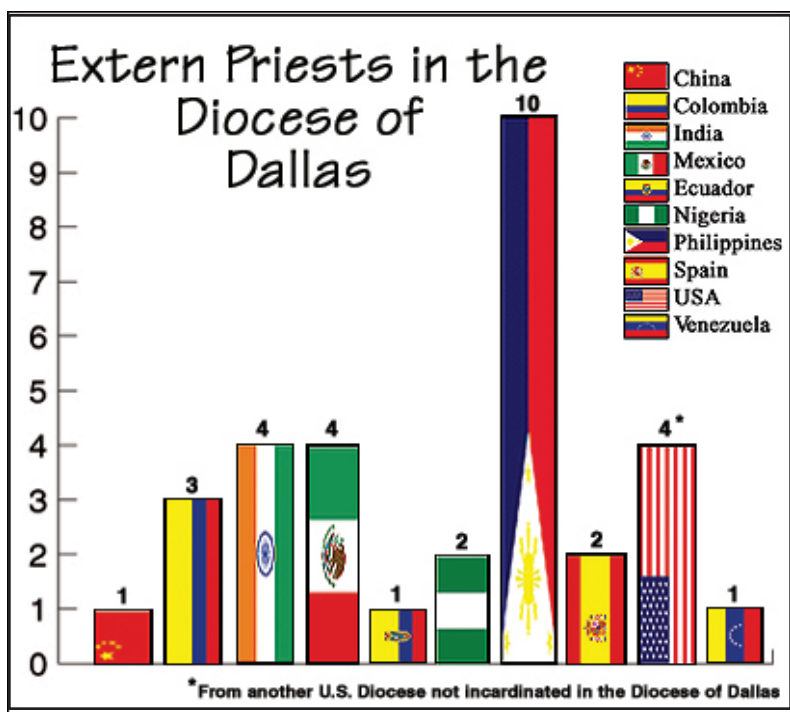
“One of the problems has nothing to do with the priests. It’s that Americans have a lazy ear,” Cochram said.

The program is organized so that upon completion, and even during it, the priests can practice on their own.

“They are already aware of their challenges,” Cochram said. “One of them immediately said to me, ‘I can tell you what my problem is,’ even before she had performed the diagnostic tests.”

By the end of the 13-week course, Yates and Cochram expect to see a 50 percent reduction in pronunciation errors.

“Our goal is to make them more easily understood especially in their homilies,” they said.



TC Graphic by Lauren Horton