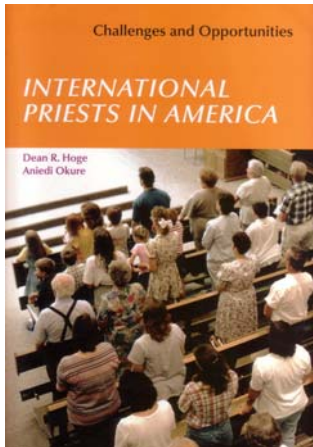


Book review:



International Priests in America: Challenges and Opportunities

Dean R. Hoge and Aniedi Okure
Liturgical Press 2006

Several Australian Catholic dioceses have actively recruited priests from countries such as India, Vietnam and the Philippines and welcomed them into parish ministry. How successful are such appointments? How well do these clergy provide the ministry that Australian parishes need?

Dean Hoge, from the Catholic University of America, has done a major study of foreign-born priests in the Catholic Church in the United States. Along with Aniedi Okure, he has recently written a book on the study, *International Priests in America: Challenges and Opportunities*. They record that around 5,500 Catholic 'international' priests were serving in the United States in 2004. They estimate that around 16% of all priests in the United States are foreign-born, and the proportion is rising (2006, p.11). While recruiting clergy overseas is not new, in the past such clergy came to serve churches of recent immigrants rather than mainstream American churches.

The first part of the book asks *whether* the Catholic Church in the United States should continue to bring in more international priests, while the second part is about *how* this should be done.

Hoge and Okure note some of the arguments for bringing in international priests. These include the need for priests to serve immigrant parishes and to meet shortages of priests in the USA. Another argument is that international priests can help universalise and revitalize American Catholicism. Among the arguments against encouraging international priests to come to the USA are the problems that occur in language and cultural misunderstandings and the different ecclesiologies they bring. International priests do not always mix well, either with their parishioners or with other priests. Some argue that bringing in priests is an irrational deployment of world priestly resources. They are needed more in other places than in the USA. At the same time, using such priests postpones a much-needed restructuring of parish leadership and causes lay people to relax their efforts to produce their own vocations.

Hoge and Okure asked the foreign-born diocesan priests about their experiences.

- 42% said they felt they were only partly or not at all accepted by other priests,
- 44% said they did not always attend the general gatherings of priests in the diocese, and
- 16% said they felt that they had been assigned to a parish or ministry that other priests did not want.

Religious order priests were a little more positive about their acceptance (p.17).

The foreign-born priests were happiest with their sacramental and liturgical ministry, and were also fairly happy with their personal spiritual life and the conditions for their ministry. The diocesan priests (but not the religious order priests) were less happy with their present living situation, and almost all the priests were unhappy with their financial situation and the image of the Catholic priesthood among the American public. However, the biggest problem they said they

faced was loneliness. The next biggest were the amount of work and the way authority is exercised in the church (pp.18-19).

In response to a question about what would help them most in their ministry in the United States, the international priests said that the church should provide them with acculturation training, including instruction in English. They also requested periodic gatherings and support groups, equal treatment with American-born priests, more support from the diocese, and clearer rules and guidance (p. 20).

The authors made a number of recommendations, all of which could be implemented immediately:

1. Begin orienting priests in their own countries, before they go to the US, and assess their English skills there.
2. Prepare the receiving parish for the coming of an international priest, and arrange welcoming meetings and occasions to mix with parish staff and parishioners.
3. Expand and improve existing orientation programs for incoming international priests, and make participation mandatory.
4. Assign a mentor to each incoming international priest.
5. Consult with international priests about their needs (p.124)

One of the strengths of this book is that it provides an impartial assessment of the arguments both for and against bringing in international priests to work in US parishes. The authors define their job as social science analysis, that is, to gather the data and report the results. They note, for example, that many people they interviewed raised ecclesiological issues such as the criteria for ordination or the justice issues involved with the flow of priests from developing nations to a wealthy one, but they themselves do not enter into the realm of theological judgement.

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