

CHURCH CHAT

BY

TOM SMITH

INTERNATIONAL PRIESTS

The numbers seem to be increasing each week. In our diocese there were a few of them five years ago; now there must be close to twenty. From what I hear and read, a similar experience is happening in other parts of the country as well.

International priests – priests who come from Africa, India, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Poland, etc. to minister in the USA for a period of years and who then are supposed to return to their home dioceses. They are needed, presumably, because the number of native priests in the USA is dwindling.

I really don't know any of these international priests personally but what I hear is that they are generally pretty nice guys, and they do the best they can in a foreign culture. My guess is that they are as varied as our own priests. The talk is that some of them have a difficult time dealing with assertive women and collegial decision making is not their long suit, but, then again, we have our own chauvinistic, autocratic priests too.

There is one problem, however, that stands out. The language. Over and over again, I hear: "But I can't understand him when he preaches." Or, "I get maybe 50% of what he says." "He speaks English but his accent is so strong that I don't know what he is saying."

Since communication is a vital part of the pastoral ministry, the language issue is critical. How do you preach a homily when the people can't understand what you are saying? It must be frustrating for them too. How would you like to prepare a homily week after week knowing your audience can't figure out what you are saying?

Taking English speech lessons should be helpful but it's not automatic. I tried a couple languages (Spanish, German, French, etc) but the main thing I learned is that I am not a linguist. Never could figure out how to think in another language and that includes 12 years of learning and taking classes in Latin. So I sympathize with the international priests and the complicated challenge of the spoken English language.

Why put a priest and the people in such a predictable and inevitably frustrating position? It is blatant disrespect for everyone. And that's not even counting

Jesus! The Bishops who do this must think that it is better to have a priest who can't communicate than it is to have no priest at all.

Ah! There's the rub!

That kind of thinking puts the cart before the horse, the collar before the people, and an abstract theology of priesthood before the obvious needs of any liturgical function. A liturgy doomed to failed communication is a liturgy about to be abandoned. It's no wonder people leave the Church in droves. The sterile implication is that it doesn't matter that the celebrant can't communicate with the community because he can validly consecrate. That belief is an insult to everyone involved, a complete disregard for the core purpose of liturgy, and a calloused, contemptuous disrespect for the Word of God proclaimed at every Eucharist.

There are a few options:

- Have someone else preach - a deacon, trained layperson, and/or respected member(s) of the community. Rotate the preaching.
- The international priest could type out the homily, make copies, and distribute them during the homily so the community could follow along.
- Play a recorded copy of a homily for the day.
- After the readings, give the people ten minutes to talk in small groups about how these readings apply to their lives.
- Hand out some written commentaries and homilies, and give people time to read them and reflect.
- And, of course, ordain women and married men which will eliminate the need for international priests.
- Other ideas?

Any, or all, of these options is better than the current embarrassment. The liturgy is too important to allow known, assured communication failure undermine the preaching of the Word. Even when the Mass was (and is) in Latin, the homilist spoke in the vernacular – without a troublesome accent.

It's time the People of God demand to be nourished during the Liturgy of the Word. So, please, demand away!