



**CATHOLIC  
HOME  
MISSIONS**

## Called to Serve: International Priests in Northern Wisconsin



Fr. Louis Reddy Maram Reddy (on right), parochial administrator of St. Francis of Assisi, Pier Willow; St. Augustine, Harrison; and St. Mary, Tomahawk, celebrated the 30th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood March 10. The parish family of St. Francis of Assisi presented him with a certificate from the Vatican acknowledging the Apostolic Blessing he received from Pope Francis.

By Beth Griffin

A serious shortage of sacramental ministers in rural northern Wisconsin has been alleviated through the generous intervention of priests from southern India. It is a vivid example of how the Catholic Church truly is universal.

Priestly vocations have diminished in the Diocese of Superior in Wisconsin and elsewhere in the United States over the last 25 years. While the diocese redoubled its seminary recruiting efforts, it also cast a wider net and found help from several dioceses and religious congregations in and near the state of Andhra Pradesh in India. An initial positive experience with a priest from India has enabled the bishops of Superior to keep parishes vibrantly staffed with a succession of dedicated, well-qualified Indian priests. The diocese developed relationships with Indian counterparts, and some of the early Indian priests recommended their seminary classmates for service in Wisconsin. Today, international priests from India and Ghana, West Africa, make up more than 40% of priests serving in the Diocese of Superior.

The Diocese of Superior uses funds from Catholic Home Missions (CHM) in the orientation, training, and continuing education of priests from abroad. Christine (Chris) Newkirk is the diocesan director of ecclesial ministries and diocesan consultation. She says international priests are generally well received by parishioners, who are grateful to celebrate the sacraments, but the transition for the parish and the priest is sometimes complex. The CHM-funded program helps smooth the way for successful ministry in the diocese, she says.

“There is not a lot of multicultural diversity in the diocese, and while it is rare to have outward discrimination, we do work on openness, invitation, hospitality, welcome, and gratitude,” Chris says. “In general, our international priests are accepted very well, and the parishioners love and care for them.”

Robert (Bob) Lecheler is the international priests orientation specialist for the diocese. He says the international priests “come to the U.S. very open to understanding and respecting our culture. They are dedicated to their ministry to bring people closer to God.”

The Diocese of Superior covers a vast swath of northern Wisconsin—almost 16,000 square miles—and includes rural towns and small cities. Most of the 103 parishes are in clusters. Fully 25% of priests in the diocese serve as the primary priest for clusters of four to six parishes. Five permanent deacons and one laywoman serve in pastoral leadership roles in another 25% of parishes. International priests serve as sacramental ministers or parochial administrators.

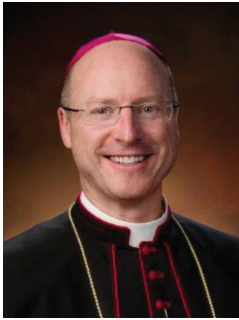
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# Neighbors

ISSUE 4 2021

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM MISSION AMERICA

# FROM THE CHAIRMAN



Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Among the many strengths I have seen in home mission dioceses throughout the country are their creative solutions to meeting the pastoral needs of their communities. Whether through expanded youth ministries that bring together young people from multiple parishes, outreach to Hispanic immigrant families who are new to the

community, or initiatives that train volunteers who minister to the sick and to prisoners, these dioceses share the Gospel in innovative ways despite limited financial resources.

In this issue, you will read how the Diocese of Superior reaches out to priests from India and Ghana to minister in local parishes with funding from the Catholic Home Missions Appeal. The international priest orientation program allows the diocese to determine whether an international priest will be a good fit in the diocese and how the diocese helps the priest with the paperwork and administrative tasks required for his employment. The program then goes beyond those initial tasks by working with the priest and the parish ahead of his arrival so that he will be welcome and that his adjustment to a new country, climate, and the northern Wisconsin culture will be as smooth as possible.

This program and many others fund by the Catholic Home Missions Appeal addresses the real needs of dioceses and eparchies across the United States and its territories including the availability of clergy here at home as the number of priestly vocations diminish in many locations.

I am grateful to you for supporting the Catholic Home Missions Appeal and helping our home mission dioceses like Superior live and share the Gospel.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Reverend W. Shawn McKnight  
Bishop of Jefferson City  
Chairman, USCCB Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions



International priests participating in a seed-planting activity during the School of Servant Leadership.

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## RECRUITING

Most candidates from India hear about the Diocese of Superior through word of mouth from fellow countrymen who have served there, Chris says. The diocese also receives some unsolicited placement requests. Chris is part of a leadership team that reviews a candidate's resume, credentials, ministry experiences, and references from his bishop. Chris then touches base with a video call. "It helps me get to know a candidate, get a sense of his personality and his hopes for his ministry," she says. "I can also determine how his English is, as many Indian priests have English as a second language."

She has found that the best predictors of success in a pastoral assignment in the diocese are engagement and effective communication. "It helps if they are able to get to know those they serve as quickly as possible. I also want them to be confident they can understand us and be understood," she says.

International priests generally serve an initial five-year term, and some ask for an extension. While the extension is often granted, it is not automatic, Chris says. The bishop of Superior (currently Bishop James Patrick Powers) and each international priest's bishop have an agreement that states the priest can be called back or sent back at any time. Since the beginning of the program, four international priests have been incardinated into the diocese at their request.

## SETTLING IN

Orientation and training are conducted both for the receiving parish and for the international priest, Chris says. Before the priest's arrival at a parish, she and Bob meet with parish staff, parish councils, and other leaders to discuss expectations and address concerns. These discussions are particularly important in parish clusters preparing to welcome their first international priest.

"Different parish clusters have different personalities," Bob says. "Matching a priest with the cluster is crucial."

In an ideal situation, according to Bob, a newly arrived priest would spend a month with a resident priest, acclimating to Wisconsin and getting to know the diocese, before taking an assignment. In reality, life and logistics preclude a protracted introduction, he says.

Chris and Bob have both spent time studying Indian culture. Bob says getting to know the priests and their culture has been “a high learning curve” from his earlier work in school administration.

Chris helps the newcomers set the tone in their new parish setting and guides them through the initial employment paperwork and logistics of applying for a driver’s license and Social Security number. “It’s information overload,” Bob says, “but Chris builds relationships with the priests. She is friendly and warm and wants them to enjoy their experience.”

One of the significant differences between parishes in India and those in the United States is the role of the priest. In India, Chris says, “priests do a lot of the parish administration by themselves.

They don’t have lay staff, and they may not be accustomed to working with permanent deacons or women.” Hence, the orientation includes the importance of collegiality, delegation, the role of deacons and lay ministers, and interaction with parish councils. Orientation also covers safe environment and boundary issues.

“We want to encourage the international priests to fully use the gifts and talents of other clergy and the laity for the benefit of the whole,” Chris says.

Because language can be an impediment, the diocese offers pronunciation resources. It also encourages international priests to identify a local parishioner who can provide honest feedback on how well the priest is understood.

And then there’s the weather. In January, the average temperature in Superior is 9 degrees. In Andhra Pradesh, it’s 76 degrees. Some of the Indian priests arrive in the diocese after service in Canada or Australia, but most experience their first snow and subfreezing weather in Wisconsin. It’s one of those things that’s hard to describe in advance to someone who has never needed to own an insulated coat.

## SERVING

As the international priests acclimate to their new assignments, they often share experiences of their own lives with parishioners. Bob says some have had impressive leadership roles in their home dioceses, and a few had collegiate careers as soccer or volleyball athletes.

He recalls a parish whose new arrival bonded with the staff over their shared appreciation for home-cooked food. “The parish was a strong Italian community,” Bob says. “He was their first international priest, and by the end of our introductory visit, they are sharing recipes. It was great to witness the give-and-take of them getting to know one another.”

“Father described riding a motorcycle on the dirt roads of his parish in India,” Bob adds. “The staff advised him what type of four-wheeler he might need to dodge deer and elk in the north woods here.”

Chris says the Indian priests have been generous in sharing their devotion to Mary. Some have blended Indian Catholic traditions with more familiar ones. She described a Mass for long-married couples who could not make the long drive to a diocesan celebration with Bishop Powers at the cathedral in Superior. “Father scheduled the Mass for the same day as the bishop’s Mass. He burned fragrant sandalwood and arranged bowls of flowers and floating candles on the altar. He called the couples forward in advancing order of the number of years they were married,” Chris says. “He honored the oldest as sages and wisdom figures in the parish.”

The current group of international priests ranges in age from 34 to 58. Chris says, “Most are flexible and adaptable in a good, healthy way. They are learning what is sacred to the community and figuring out how to connect.”

Bob says he visited a newcomer to see how he was settling in, and the priest proudly showed him the Green Bay Packers hat and shirt he had bought.

In addition to deciphering the rules of NFL

competition, some international priests are cooking for themselves for the first time in their lives. “It’s very impressive,” Bob says.

“I have deep admiration for all they have given up to be away from their family and culture and be here to minister to us,” he says. “And the parishioners are very appreciative. They realize without Father coming, we may not even be a parish.”

“One thing we hear repeatedly from parishioners is that the international priests are pastoral, very holy and caring, day and night,” Chris says. “One who was first on the scene after a tornado touched down provided on-the-spot crisis management and pastoral care.”

Chris says the supportive training for international priests also includes quarterly in-services where priests can raise concerns or ask for specific help, such as with marriage preparation and tribunal procedures. An upcoming session will feature a speech pathologist to focus on sentence structure and pronunciation. All trainings offer the opportunity for the priests to socialize and share experiences with their countrymen.

Bishop Powers says, “The international priests are a blessing to us. They come very well prepared to meet the spiritual and sacramental needs of our faithful. However, due to American cultural and administrative differences, they are often in need of acclimation, orientation, and training in how to assume these responsibilities. Without the generous financial assistance of Catholic Home Missions, we would not have the resources to prepare them properly for ministry in the United States.”



**Bishop Powers is assisted by Dcn. John Grek as the bishop addresses his priests and invites them to renew their priestly promises after the Chrism Mass homily. (Catholic Herald photo by Jenny Snarski)**



*Strengthening the Church at Home*

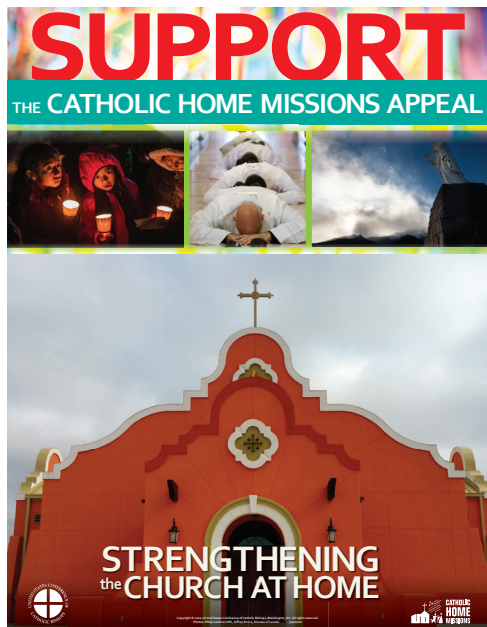
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**ISSUE 4 2021**

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**READ ABOUT HOW**

the Diocese of Superior works with its international priests so that they can minister effectively as they adjust to life in Northern Wisconsin.

**LEARN MORE BY READING**

the most recent CHMA Annual Report, past issues of the newsletter, and 2021 promotional materials for examples of CHM's accountability and transparency practices at [www.usccb.org/home-missions](http://www.usccb.org/home-missions).

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