

# Foreign priests still aren't the answer

I did a column in early November on the growing trend of importing foreign priests as a way of addressing the priest shortage in the United States.

What prompted the column was a story in *The New York Times* regarding a plan by the archbishop of Chicago, Francis George, to "borrow" priests and seminarians from Latin America, Eastern Europe and Africa over a period of 10 years, for five-year tours of duty.

The *Times* reported that the plan had evoked a negative reaction in the archdiocese, especially from its pastors. In a letter to the new archbishop critical of his leadership style, a group of pastors cited the plan, instituted without prior consultation.

The archbishop himself admitted that the plan had "raised a lot of hackles," and he subsequently withdrew it.

In the column I had characterized the importation of foreign priests as a false solution to the priest shortage in America.

The shortage cannot be corrected until the church's leadership makes the kind of institutional changes recommended by pastoral experts and social scientists who have studied the problem closely, and by thousands of active parish priests as well.

Those changes would include, before all else, the elimination of lifelong celibacy as a condition of ordination to the diocesan priesthood. No single factor is more re-



## essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

sponsible for the reduced number of vocations and for the thousands of priestly resignations over the past few decades.

Another important change would involve the manner in which ecclesiastical authority is exercised; for example, whether bishops make decisions after consultation or by fiat, and whether they (and the Vatican) reward intelligence, spiritual depth and pastoral wisdom in the priesthood rather than a pietistic spirituality and an uncritical loyalty to one's superiors.

Instead of addressing the root causes of the vocations decline and of the resignations, too many bishops have adopted a stop-gap solution: recruiting priests from foreign countries, without apparent regard for those countries' own pastoral needs and for the readiness of the recruited priests to serve effectively in a culture that cherishes both the right to criti-

cize those in authority and the principle of human equality, of women and men alike.

The November column elicited a vigorous reaction from some readers, including a few foreign priests. Some of the criticism, however, seemed to go a bit far. The column was portrayed as having an "anti-immigrant" bias, evidently by those who had not read any of my previous columns critical of the recent wave of anti-immigrant politics in the United States. (On a personal note, three of my grandparents were immigrants.)

And because I pointed out that many recruited priests come from black Africa, the specter of racism was even evoked.

That particularly scurrilous and slanderous accusation was, in my judgment, part of the cover for a decision to drop my column from the *Syracuse* (N.Y.) diocesan paper — a decision that I believe had already been made a few months earlier when the bishop appointed a new and journalistically inexperienced parish priest to succeed a laywoman as editor. It was just a matter of time before the right opportunity would arise. My column on foreign priests provided it.

In criticizing this one solution to the priest shortage, I do not blame the foreign priests. I blame those bishops, like the bishop who dropped my column in *Syracuse*, who recruit foreign priests with-

out prior consultation with the pastors of their dioceses, or with the parish ministers with whom these recruits will work.

Should foreign priests be welcome in the United States, even though this is not a mission country? Of course, if they are doing graduate studies in an American university, or if they are becoming U.S. citizens, or if they have come, like so many foreign priests before them, to serve the special pastoral needs of immigrants from their own countries.

But it is wrong to recruit foreign priests simply to supplement the diocesan presbyterate, to be assigned wherever the need exists for a priest with the sacramental powers conferred in ordination.

Priesthood is more than a sacramental ministry. It is a leadership ministry that requires the capacity to collaborate with other parish ministers, most of whom are women. For many foreign priests, that may be the greatest challenge they face in the United States.

Recruiting foreign priests is a Band-Aid solution, designed to avoid facing up to the root causes of the priest shortage: obligatory celibacy and a flawed system of ecclesiastical governance and advancement.

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Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

## God-given talent: Use it or lose it

**Sunday's Readings:** (R3) Luke 13:1-9. (R1) Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15. (R2) 1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12.

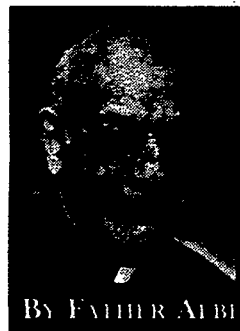
Jesus told a parable about a man who owned a vineyard. In the vineyard there was a fig tree. For three years the owner looked for figs from this tree and found none. So he said to the vinedresser, "Cut it down. Why should it clutter up the ground?"

Time and again Jesus showed impatience with people who do not take advantage of opportunities from God. They are nice people but they produce no fruit.

Note, first of all, that Jesus did not ask the fig tree to produce bananas. He didn't ask the fig tree to become an oak or a redwood. Jesus asked only that it accomplish what fig trees ought to accomplish — bear figs.

You and I have differing gifts. Some of us have nice singing voices. Some are artists. Some have high IQ's. Some are great athletes. Some are good with numbers; others are good with people. All of us have some natural ability, though. The secret is to find our natural abilities and give them all we've got.

An editor told Louisa May Alcott that she was incapable of writing anything that would have popular appeal. That, of



## a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

course, was before she wrote *Little Women*.

Walt Disney was once fired by a newspaper editor because he was thought to have no "good ideas."

When F.W. Woolworth was 21, he got a job in a store, but was not allowed to wait on customers because he "didn't have enough sense."

Each of these famous people proved to have a certain genius. But it wasn't innate: It grew out of their dedication to developing what they had been given by God. Did not Edison say, "One percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration?"

Life does not ask us to become what we are not. All Jesus wanted from the fig tree was figs. Develop the gifts God has given you.

There is one area of life where all of us

are equally gifted. We can all follow Jesus and bear spiritual fruit. The question is, is that important to us? Are we willing to give it our best?

A man once watched a movie on television. In it he saw a Muslim from India fall on his knees in the dust and the heat of the day. Five times a day this Muslim stopped, faced his holy city of Mecca and worshiped Allah. The man asked himself the question, "Do I really love Jesus like that?"

One Saturday morning my doorbell rang. Two enthusiastic young men, Mormons, were there smiling and anxious to talk about their religious sect. Of course I could not accept their doctrines. But they were so sincere, so dedicated, that I was impressed. When they left, I watched them go down the street to another house.

I admired their zeal, their grit, their graciousness. I wondered how many of my own fellow religionists would go from door-to-door and tell others about Christ. It's not a question that we can't, but a matter of desire, of giving one's best for Christ.

Of the barren fig tree the owner of the vineyard said to his vinedresser, "Cut it down; why should it use up ground?" But the vinedresser answered, "Give it another year, sir. Let me put fertilizer around it and if it bears fruit, well and good; but, if

not, you can cut it down."

There's still time. Ought we not to ask ourselves are we bearing the fruit that Christ means us to bear — in our jobs, in our homes, in our communities?

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Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

## Daily Readings

**Monday, March 16**  
2 Kings 5:1-15; Luke 4:24-30  
**Tuesday, March 17**  
Daniel 3:25, 34-43;  
Matthew 18:21-35  
**Wednesday, March 18**  
Deuteronomy 4:1, 5-9;  
Matthew 5:17-19  
**Thursday, March 19**  
2 Samuel 7:4-5, 12-14, 16;  
Romans 4:13, 16-18, 22  
Matthew 1:16, 18-21, 24  
or Luke 2:41-51  
**Friday, March 20**  
Hosea 14:2-10; Mark 12:28-34  
**Saturday, March 21**  
Hosea 6:1-6; Luke 18:9-14

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