

CONTINUED...

Foreign priests

continued from page 1

That's just fine with Father Michael Conboy, diocesan director of priest personnel, who is constantly challenged to fill openings that arise unexpectedly at parishes.

"They're great blessings," Father Conboy said of the foreign priests.

These developments are occurring amid an ongoing debate as to whether American dioceses should be looking outside their own country to address priest shortages. Diocesan officials have been criticized, at times, for not seeking this option more regularly, according to Grocki. But only in recent years has it become possible, perhaps even necessary, for the diocese to work more foreign priests into the mix, she said.

"We've got the slots now. If there were two or three priests at each parish, there wouldn't be the need," she said.

Presently, 152 Rochester diocesan priests serve in nearly 200 faith communities. There are also nearly 100 retired, sick or absent diocesan priests and 47 order priests.

Welcomed, needed support

Father Steve Kraus, pastor of Holy Family Catholic Community in Steuben and Livingston counties, certainly sees a need for extra support. Last fall his parochial vicar, Father Lance Gonyo, was suddenly reassigned. With no available diocesan priest to step in, Father Kraus was left as the only full-time priest to cover four churches.

However, the pastor found out that a priest from Sri Lanka was on a two-year sabbatical in the United States, and might be willing to serve in the Rochester Diocese. Shortly after 7 a.m. on a December morning, Father Kraus drove to a Rochester bus station to meet Father Quintus Fernando, who had traveled in from Michigan.

Only two days later, Father Kraus and Father Fernando agreed that the Sri Lankan priest would become part of Holy Family Catholic Community.

"I didn't want to miss the opportunity to get him. With the priest shortage, this is what we're facing," Father Kraus said.

Father Fernando, 54, has been a priest for 20 years. He is assigned to Holy Family until at least June 2001. The priest, who normally speaks rapidly in broken English, offered a one-word reply when asked what his most difficult adjustment has been.

"Spow," he said with a smile. Father Fernando is undaunted by the ground he covers in the parish, saying that in Sri Lanka, "On some weekends I used to say 10 Masses. This is a piece of cake."

Another four-church Southern Tier cluster, Roman Catholic Faith Community of the Canisteo Valley, has been operating with one full-time priest and two retired priests for several months. But Father Elias Menuba, a Nigerian priest who had come to Rochester to study earlier this year, has committed to being a parochial vicar.

"There really wasn't a (diocesan) priest to send there," Grocki said.

And parishioners at St. Thomas St. Lucy in Leicester and Retsof were served by a foreign priest for the first time when Father Desmond O'Neill, an Australian priest, became pastor in 1999. But Father O'Neill died March 31, and St. Thomas/St. Lucy was again in search of a priest.

Once more, a foreign priest was tapped. Father Okoth, 40, a priest for 11 years, had originally come to the U.S. to study. He had served at hospitals and parishes in Monroe County since September 1998. After Bishop Matthew H. Clark approached him about the Leicester/Retsof opening, Father Okoth took the assignment with the blessings of his bishop, Linus Okok, of the Kenyan Diocese of Homa-Bay.

Father Okoth is the second African priest to be named pastor of a Rochester diocesan parish. The first is Father Peter Enyan-Boadu, of Ghana, who took the pastorate at Brockport's Church of the Nativity in 1999. Father Enyan-Boadu, in 1996, became the first — and only, thus far — African priest to be incardinated as a Rochester diocesan priest.



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

Father Adam Ogorzaly (a native of Poland), from St. Stanislaus Parish, receives a hug from Father Peter Enyan-Boadu at the priests' luncheon on July 11 at St. Jerome's in East Rochester.

Armed with experience

Grocki said that foreign priests write to this diocese, as well as other U.S. dioceses, seeing if a parish may be willing to put them up during their sabbatical or while they attend college. In exchange, they normally provide sacramental duty based on the needs of the diocese.

"Their bishop will usually allow them to come for a set time so they can get the cultural experience," Grocki said.

Grocki said it's important for foreign priests to communicate with the Office of Priest Personnel on such matters as immigration status; compensation and benefits, if applicable; and planned length of stay. The priests must also produce documentation from their home diocese verifying they are priests in good standing and have permission from their bishop to serve abroad.

There is no formalized diocesan process by which foreign priests arrive in, and leave from, this diocese. They may do so with little advance notice — perhaps because they're needed in their home diocese, or their immigration rights are expiring.

"It's very unscientific. It's word of mouth," Father Conboy said.

Many foreign priests come to this diocese with a significant level of ministerial,

educational and professional background. For instance, Father Fernando has had three different pastorates. And Father Edwin Obiorah of Nigeria, who assists at Our Mother of Sorrows Parish in Greece, has a private law practice.

Since arriving in Rochester in 1994, Father Obiorah has encouraged other Nigerian priests to come to this diocese. Another pipeline has been the Basilian Fathers, who for the last three decades have sponsored Kenyan priests to study at St. John Fisher College while living at the Basilian residence on East Avenue in Rochester. The priests assist at area parishes.

Rochester also sees a regular influx of foreign priests to work with their own ethnic groups. Poland has proven especially fertile in this regard, and has yielded priests who were eventually incardinated — formally transferred from one diocese into another — as Rochester diocesan priests. Currently, Father Adam Ogorzaly, pastor of Rochester's St. Stanislaus Church, is in the process of being incardinated.

Father Conboy and Olsen said that foreign priests are largely attracted to this diocese for educational opportunities in such communities as Rochester, Elmira and Ithaca. Yet not only are their stays growing longer, but Father Enyan-Boadu noted that

a couple of African priests have recently contacted him about incardination.

Father Okoth said there is no firm plan regarding when, and if, he will return to his homeland.

"I believe there is nothing that's written on a stone tablet. Everything is flexible," he said.

Meanwhile, Father Fernando said he is enjoying his stay in the Southern Tier so much, he is weighing the possibility of a long-term commitment to this diocese.

"I don't mind that the next time I see my bishop, to ask for the extension," Father Fernando said. "I'm happy, that's the first reason. There's the possibility of many happy years in the diocese."

The solution?

But should foreign priests be serving in American dioceses, leaving potential voids within their dioceses back home? Father Richard McBrien, a University of Notre Dame professor whose column appears in the *Catholic Courier*, doesn't think so.

"As true missionaries ... they must be ready eventually to return to their own countries or go wherever else they may be needed," Father McBrien wrote in a June 30 letter to the editor in the *National Catholic Reporter*.

In a July 13 letter to the editor in the *Catholic Courier*, Father Lee Chase, pastor of Brighton's St. Thomas More Parish, termed the use of African priests "a quick fix ... so that we can continue being spoiled with many Masses, available when we want them." Father Chase also stated that the ratio of Catholics per priest in Africa is much higher than in the United States.

Father Okoth acknowledged that if vocations in the Rochester Diocese were more plentiful, his presence here would not be as crucial right now.

"It calls for a bit of reflection. Where have we gone wrong, that we (in the U.S.) don't have enough priests?" he said.

Father Okoth said that Kenya is not overflowing with priests, either, but he perceives a greater need here. He noted that seven men from his diocese are due to be ordained this year — compared with two for the Rochester Diocese in 2000.

Diocesan officials, as well, said that foreign priests should be viewed as a temporary solution to the lack of local vocations. Olsen remarked that the rise of foreign priests in this diocese "has not hindered or slowed down" the diocese's own efforts to raise vocations awareness in parishes.

"The number of Catholics has dramatically increased and the population of priests is going down. But vocations is a topic that families don't talk about anymore," Olsen commented.

Grocki pointed out that foreign priests cannot be viewed simply as warm bodies to fill gaps. She said that foreign priests must be aligned with pastors who are willing to mentor; have suitable command of English and other communication skills; be accepted by the parish community; and be willing to adapt to their environment.

She added that despite the occasional priest who is incardinated, most foreign priests' stays in this diocese are — and should be — short-term.

"You can't put on an extra daily Mass, because what happens when he's gone?" Grocki remarked. "I just don't think this is the answer. I wouldn't want to depend on this as the answer. Whatever they learn here, they're supposed to take back home. They have a loyalty to their diocese. They may also have family that they miss."

However, if the priest's bishop back home deems that an extended stay will not cripple that diocese, Father Enyan-Boadu said that an international mix has many positive aspects.

"I do believe that the church, per se, is not complete without various people who make up the universal church," Father Enyan-Boadu said.

For now, Father Okoth said he will treat both Bishop Clark and his bishop in Kenya with equal obedience. He pointed out that regardless of where he serves, he is still a Catholic priest.

"My loyalty is to the church," he stated.

17 foreign priests in diocese

Here is a listing of foreign priests currently serving in the Rochester Diocese. Information was provided by the diocesan Office of Priest Personnel.

Father Andrew An (Vietnam), parochial vicar, Rochester's St. Anthony of Padua Church; Vietnamese ministry

Father Norbert Chumu (Kenya): in residence, Basilian Fathers of East Rochester

Father Peter Enyan-Boadu (Ghana): pastor, Church of the Nativity, Brockport (incardinated in 1996)

Father Quintus Fernando (Sri Lanka): parochial vicar, Holy Family Catholic Community in Southern Tier

Father Jesus Flores (Mexico): Hispanic ministry in Wayne County; sacramental minister at Wayne County parishes

Father Damian Iokaba (Nigeria): chaplain, Monroe Community Hospital, Rochester; sacramental minister, St. Mary's Parish, Scottsville

Father James Kiarie (Kenya): in residence, Basilian Fathers of East Rochester

Father Elias Menuba (Nigeria): parochial vicar, Roman Catholic Faith

Community of the Canisteo Valley in Southern Tier

Father Michael Murimi (Kenya): parochial vicar, St. Cecilia Parish, Irondequoit

Father Edwin Obiorah (Nigeria): lawyer; assisting priest, Greece's Our Mother of Sorrows Parish

Father Adam Ogorzaly (Poland): pastor, St. Stanislaus Parish, Rochester (in process of being incardinated)

Father George Okoth (Kenya): pastor, St. Thomas Aquinas, Leicester/St. Lucy, Retsof; sacramental minister, SUNY Genesee

Father Willie Onuh (Nigeria): chaplain, Groveland and Livingston correctional facilities

Father Pius Pathmarajah (Sri Lanka): judge, diocesan Tribunal; assistant, City West parishes in Rochester

Father Felician Sierotowicz (Poland): celebrates Polish Mass at Rochester's St. Stanislaus Parish

Father Ernest Udoh (Nigeria): assisting priest, Rochester's Church of the Annunciation

Father Mitch Zygadlo (Poland): currently serving in U.S. Air Force (incardinated in 1992)