

WORLD & NATION

Vatican rules restrict foreign priests' time abroad

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Concerned about the growing number of native clergy emigrating out of missionary dioceses, the Vatican issued stricter rules to govern how long priests may be gone and to make sure they return home.

The Vatican said study and training abroad can be useful for priests from mission territories, but their own dioceses should ultimately benefit. Too often, it said, clergy from developing countries spend many years in Europe or North America because of better living conditions and because they are needed to serve in First World dioceses.

It called on bishops to set conditions and a time limit for each case of clergy exchange and to take immediate steps for the return of priests in "irregular" situations.

The norms were part of a 14-page instruction issued June 12 by the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. The document was approved by Pope John Paul II in April.

Cardinal Jozef Tomko, recently retired head of the evangelization congregation, said in a commentary that the norms were needed so that mission territories are not depleted of local priests, especially as the number of foreign missionaries declines.

He said some African and Asian dioceses today have between one-third and one-half of their clergy abroad. Given the vocations crisis in the West, he said, some bishops there are taking the "easy solution" of filling pastoral needs with African, Asian and Latin American priests, without thinking of damage being done to the native missionary churches.

In Italy alone, there are 1,800 priests from missionary territories, 800 of them

engaged in full-time pastoral service.

"Can Italy consider itself a 'mission territory' to such an extent?" Cardinal Tomko said.

Likewise, he said, one European diocese is employing 39 priests from India, a country where a billion people are still waiting to be evangelized.

The document said the exchange of diocesan clergy was still a sound principle, especially between one missionary diocese and another. Sending priests abroad for study also can be useful for churches in missionary territories, but such study should be geared specifically to the needs of the home diocese, it said.

The document said many priests from missionary territories "want to leave their own country and reside in Europe or North America, often with the intention of further studies or for other reasons that are not actually missionary."

"Often their motives are based on the higher living conditions which these countries offer and the need for young priests in some of the established churches. These priests are then convinced by such reasoning not to return to their own country, sometimes with the tacit permission of their own bishop," it said.

It called on bishops to let priests know, even in seminary programs, that they do not have a "supposed right to pursue further studies after ordination."

When sending clergy abroad for study, bishops in missionary territories should select only those priests who are "truly gifted" and determine a course of study that will provide clear benefits to the diocese or the region, it said. The bishop also should set a date of definitive return, it said.

The host bishop should be asked to provide pastoral work for the duration of the priest's study, but nothing so burden-

some that it would prevent the priest from completing his course work.

The host bishop has the right to send a priest back in the case of grave problems, and any priest who refuses should be punished with an appropriate penalty, the document said.

It said bishops should not send abroad for further study priests who have personal problems "in the vain hope that they may find a remedy"; instead, they should be helped in other ways, it said.

Msgr. Massimo Boarotto, an official of

the evangelization congregation who helped prepare the document, told Catholic News Service that the problem of absentee priests has been developing for several years.

"Usually, they come to study. Then the studies are extended, and the priests stay longer. Then they do pastoral work, which doesn't harmonize well with the studies. And some Western bishops need these priests to cover pastoral areas, so they are happy to have them," Msgr. Boarotto said.

Five new saints

A woman places relics of the newest saints on a pedestal near the altar in St. Peter's Square June 10. During the service Pope John Paul II declared five new saints, including Lebanon's first female saint, Sister Rafqa Pietra Chobq ar-Rayas.



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