



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Bishops' Committee for Clergy and Religious

SOME ISSUES TO CONSIDER WHEN WELCOMING PRIESTS COMING FROM OVERSEAS

An overview

Since the time of St Paul, the Church has aspired to be a community where there are 'no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave or free, male and female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:27).

The people who, *ab origine*, have lived on this continent and its islands could hear the 'good news of Jesus' only if people bearing that good news came here from across the seas. They could celebrate the Eucharist, initially at least, only if led by non-indigenous priests.

Long after the transportation of convicts (many of them Irish) ceased, Ireland continued to provide the bulk of Australia's bishops and priests.

For more than fifty years, priests born in Australia have travelled back across the oceans, and have taken the good news, and their priestly ministry, to communities in many parts of Oceania, Asia, Africa and Central and South America. Jesuits, Pallotines and Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, among others, have also worked long and hard to live and preach the gospel among our own indigenous communities.

So the Church in Australia has a long experience of priests ministering in countries and cultures other than their own.

Priests who might be key people in this conversation

Australia has experienced two major waves of immigration since the Second World War. In the late 1940s and all through the 1950s people came from Southern and Eastern Europe and many of these were Catholic (some belonging to Eastern Churches). Then, after the dismantling of the White Australia Policy in the 1970s, Australia became home to many people from Asia and the South Pacific, from Central and South America and some from Africa.

Many of the overseas-born priests now ministering in Australia came here as children or young adults, when their families immigrated in either of these waves of immigration. A *Directory of Catholic Clergy in Australia* in the 1950s would have contained predominantly Celtic and Anglo-Saxon names. By the 1970s there were also Italian, Dutch and Maltese names, while the present '*green book*' includes names from Vietnam, the Subcontinent, other parts of Asia as well as Africa and Central and South America.

Some of these priests would be key people in any program of 'inculturation' that may be offered in a diocese. They have the experience of their whole family facing the challenge of moving to a new country, learning a new language, and finding ways to adapt their own rich cultural background to the new, dominant, Australian culture.

Other key people would be priests who have gone in the opposite direction, Australian-born priests who have gone to other lands, learnt other languages, ministered in other cultural

situations. Many religious orders in Australia have priests who have worked overseas, and quite a few dioceses would have secular priests who have spent time in PNG, South America, etc.

Some issues to be addressed before arrival

- The diocese or religious order should ensure that arrangements are made for the priest's *medical cover* and *hospital cover*. Access to Medicare etc. will depend on the nature of his visa. These matters should be attended to in collaboration with the Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office.
- The diocese or religious order must ask for a written statement from the priest indicating whether there have been any substantiated claims of abuse against him, or whether there are known circumstances that could lead to a complaint of abuse.
- The diocese or religious order must likewise receive from the diocese or religious order to which the priest has previously been attached a written statement indicating whether such authority knows of any complaints of abuse which have been substantiated or is aware of circumstances that could lead to a complaint of abuse (see *Towards Healing*, December 2000, 44.6-7).
- Before beginning his ministry the priest will need to comply with relevant legislation regarding child protection. Depending on the State or Territory, this may involve making a statutory declaration, obtaining a government-issued Suitability Card, etc.

Some immediate, practical issues upon arrival

First impressions. The first days in a new country can be disorienting, especially if one has trouble understanding the local language or accent. Jetlag can compound feelings of sadness at leaving one's family and homeland. Dioceses and religious orders should exercise special pastoral care to newly arriving priests.

In his first few days and weeks in Australia the following are among the things that need to be attended to:

- *Eating, cooking, washing, ironing, shopping.* The food and drink may not be what the priest is used to, nor the comparative size of various meals at different times of the day. The priest may like (or want) to cook some things for himself, but may not have the ingredients to hand. He will need to learn the local domestic arrangements for washing and ironing. The priest may experience some surprise (and resistance) at the idea that he (at least sometimes) might have to do his own cooking, washing, ironing or shopping.
- *Financial matters.* The priest may need help to open and operate an Australian bank account and get a tax file number. He may be unaccustomed to the high stipend he is now receiving. However, he may also be surprised at how much things cost.
- The newly arriving priest may need to *learn to drive*, or to become accustomed to *driving on the left*. This should be arranged by the diocese or religious order.

An orientation program

Soon after his arrival the priest should be able to participate in an orientation program organised or supported by his diocese or religious order. Such a program should include the following elements:

- *meeting key people* in the diocese or religious order. These would include:
 - the bishop, vicar general, the dean of the area and priests of the local deanery,
 - diocesan director of clergy life and ministry;
 - regional and local religious superiors and other members of the same religious congregation;
 - members of the diocesan Immigration / Multicultural Office;
 - local pastoral associate, school principal, religious education coordinator and school
 - staff, members of pastoral council, etc.
 - heads of various diocesan agencies.
- getting a feel for *diocesan life*. This would include:
 - the history and geography of the diocese
 - becoming familiar with key diocesan agencies (Diocesan Pastoral Council, Centacare, Catholic Education Office, other diocesan commissions)
 - participating in regular clergy gatherings (deanery meetings, clergy conferences and seminars, clergy retreats).
- *Language assessment*. A newly-arrived priest may want or need help with speaking and understanding English as spoken in Australia. This may be the case even for a priest who writes and speaks English fluently. Arrangements should be made in such a case for the priest to be able to undertake an appropriate language assessment course and, if necessary, further language tutoring.
- All people working within the Church in Australia are to be familiar with, and live by, the principles outlined in *Integrity in Ministry*. An incoming priest needs to be made familiar with all aspects of this document, not only those dealing with issues such as professional standards, "boundaries", etc., but also such things as personal care, taking days off, holidays etc.
- Like any priest coming new into a parish, a priest arriving from overseas will need to become familiar with the customs and traditions of the place where he is now ministering. He may need help in understanding the *roles and responsibilities of others he will be working with* - pastoral associates and others involved in lay ministries, secretaries, housekeepers, school principals and other staff, etc.

Some issues that would need to be addressed

As he becomes more familiar with his local situation and pastoral placement, a newly arriving priest may need and want to explore some of the '*cultural differences*' he is encountering. These may cover a wide range of issues. Among these could be:

- *The place of women in Australian society*. Some overseas priests come from countries where a woman may rarely if ever be inside the presbytery or parish house, and where

a priest would have a male cook, cleaner, driver, etc. It can be a significant change for a priest to relate appropriately to a woman housekeeper, secretary, pastoral associate or school principal

- The concept of *saving face* sometimes leaves an overseas priest handling conflict differently from the way Australian-born people handle it. The newcomer can appear devious or dishonest. To him, on the other hand, the Australian can appear confrontational, critical or rude.
- In Australia the Church exists in a *secular, pluralist society*, where the words 'religiosity' and even 'piety' are often pejorative. Devotions, statues, processions etc. may have a less central place in Australian church life than they did in an overseas priest's country of birth.
- A priest coming from overseas will also benefit from coaching about *Australian 'popular culture'*, ranging from Anzac Day and Australia Day to the backyard post-baptismal barbecue and the formal wedding reception (what to wear, when to arrive, whether to bring anything, how long to stay ...). It would also be valuable to take overseas priests, whatever their personal interests, to some sporting matches, plays, films and concerts.
- Any priest ministering in today's multi-cultural Australia is likely to encounter situations where he is to officiate at key ceremonies (especially *weddings and funerals*) for communities of a culture different from his own. A priest newly arrived in Australia may need particular help and support (including review and feedback) in these areas of ministry.

Some particular challenges

Multiculturalism - monoculturalism

Many Australian-born priests, particularly older ones, grew up in a predominantly monocultural society. They have faced the challenge of adapting to a largely multicultural society, especially in the capital cities and larger towns. In the same way, a priest coming to Australia from overseas may have lived in a predominantly monocultural society. He may need help in adjusting to this new situation.

Racism

The reality of multiculturalism can unmask in any of us a hitherto unnoticed or unchallenged racism. Thus, the presence of a priest born overseas may bring to the surface racist reactions from some fellow priests, some parishioners and some people in the broader community.

By the same token, not every misunderstanding or apparent slight experienced by the newcomer can be put down to racism. The newly arrived priest will need a good support group to help him analyse and deal with these issues. This should include ways to confront and overcome any racism he experiences.

Money

A priest from overseas may be coming from a situation where the standard of living was much less affluent, and where his level of remuneration was much lower than in Australia. In such a situation there may be *at least a temptation* that an Australian parish may appear not only as a mission field but also a source of financial support, if not to the priest himself, then at least to some of his family and/or acquaintances back home. Every priest must clearly distinguish between the ministerial stipend to which he is entitled and the funds and resources of the parish or community in which he ministers.

Some support structures

It is highly recommended that an incoming priest have a *mentor* or *similar support person* who will spend time with him, particularly in the first year after his arrival. This could be a pastoral associate, a parishioner, a couple or even a family. All parties should understand, in advance, that this arrangement will require a significant commitment.

The newly arrived priest may also need to find a *spiritual director, supervisor* or similar person who speaks his own language, or is from his own country or culture.

It would be important for priests born overseas to be able to *gather occasionally*, both *formally and informally*, with priests and other people of their own culture and language. This may involve gatherings on a regional or capital-city basis, with other priests travelling from neighbouring dioceses.

It would be valuable to have gatherings of *all overseas-born priests* in a diocese or region, so that they can share and reflect on their experiences together.

At these meetings, or in addition to them, it would be important for *Australian-born priests* (and occasionally other facilitators, pastoral associates, skilled people - e.g. language coaches, etc) to participate. This is the area where those mentioned above would have special expertise - priests who were born overseas but who grew up in Australia and those Australian-born religious and secular priests who have served overseas.

It would also be valuable if dioceses and/or religious congregations could *share their resources* and pool their efforts. Capital city programs should be actively promoted in the regional dioceses, and planned in conjunction with them. Information should be shared across the board, through bodies including the Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office, the National Commission for Clergy Life and Ministry, Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes, the National Council of Priests and the Australian Confraternity of Catholic Clergy.