

# To Foreign-Born Priests, Diocese Is Culture Shock

BY ROGER PAYNE

To foreign-born priests, Americans, especially New Yorkers, seem rushed and busy.

"They see Americans, especially New Yorkers, as very focused on doing things quickly," said Mary Ann Dantuono. "In many of their cultures, religious rituals are much longer, and people spend much more time at church and with Church. That's one thing we could look at: why do we feel so pressured to rush through everything?"

Dantuono was an assistant seminar leader at the Vincentian Center at St. John's University's fifth annual Acculturation Seminar. Twenty priests from 10 countries and five continents attended. Each currently serves in a diocese on the eastern seaboard, including five assigned in the Brooklyn Diocese.

"In my country, the priest is closer to the people; many of them don't have work," explained Father Hugues Berrette, a Haitian who has spent the last 10 months at Holy Innocents, Flatbush. "Here, the people are very busy. They have one hour for the Church each week. After one hour and five minutes, they cannot stay! In my country, the people meet and talk together for two hours or more."

"They tell us that most of their cultures are not as compulsive about doing things on time as Americans. Of course, their question then is, why do people come late to Mass and leave early?" explained Sister Margaret John Kelly, D.C., director of the Vincentian Center for Social Justice.

"They also wonder why people come to church and sit as far away from each other as possible at the ends of the pews," Dantuono said. "In most countries, people apparently come in and sit right down next to someone."

"The attitude to religion and spirituality is different here," said Father Matthew Chacko, a Carmelite at St. Edmund's, Sheepshead Bay. "There is a lot of materialism. Things like Eucharistic Adoration, where the Blessed Sacrament is exposed, there is no real response. I found that kind of a shocking thing. In India, you would get a large crowd. If we don't come to Jesus, the center of our faith, we're trying to build up what?"

While these are questions we as American Catholics might do well to ask ourselves, they also reflect the cultural realities international priests must recognize and deal with to be successful in their ministries. Take the priest who was invited out to dinner by a parishioner and his family. The busy two-career couple thought they were honoring him by taking him to a nice restaurant; in his culture, that meant they viewed him as unworthy to be a guest in

their home. It quickly becomes clear why surfacing such cultural differences can be valuable.

"In my country, the priest can visit the people in their homes anytime — the priest has to do that," said Father Berrette. "Here, you must have an invitation before."

The seminar also addresses very practical cultural issues such as how our banking system works. Dealing with the police turns out to be another critical topic, since many of our visitors hail from countries where the police are regarded more as adversaries than advocates. And there are other issues.

"The biggest difference here is the diversity of cultures," said Father Elvis Elano, Our Lady of Grace, Gravesend. "In the Philippines, all we have is the Filipino culture. We don't have to really study the culture; it's innate. Here, people are from different countries. Omigosh! It's a big shock!"

"In the Hispanic Apostolate, I minister to people from 14 different countries," said Father Daniel Ayala, a Colombian native stationed at Sacred Heart, Bayside.

## Colombian Tradition

In the Colombian tradition, Father Ayala leads the rosary in people's houses Monday-Friday during May and October, with each family hosting up to 50-60 people.

Interestingly, the priests learn as much from each other discussing their own cultures as they do from the instructors. "This is designed as a residential program to help them form a community of international priests," said Dantuono. "One of the ways they network is through this program."

"We have gathered here for several days from different countries," said Father Elano. "I've become more Catholic, in the true sense of the word: I'll be open to all possibilities and accept all cultures."

"I enjoyed the different cultures at the seminar: Hispanic, Indian, Slovak, Ukrainian, so many others," said Father Ayala. "Our Catholic Church is really universal. You can find Jesus in each country, each culture, and each person."

"There are priests here from 12 different cultures, each representing the face of Jesus in his own way," said Father Chacko. "The unity within that variety was remarkable. And the brotherhood, like a family — we could spend a week and discuss what we could contribute. It was very enriching."

The international priests learned much from each other about issues like lay empowerment. "In India, like here, a lot of lay people are involved," said Father Chacko. "Most parishes have only one priest, so usually the pastor takes responsibility for everything, but the lay leadership takes care of the societies."

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# Foreign-Born Priests Face Culture Shock in Diocese

specific," Sister Margaret continued, "a blend of the theoretical with very precise application. We have them compare their experiences in their native land with their experiences here in specific areas: family, gender, economy, religious practices. They identify our good points as well as bad points."

"For me, this week has been the opportunity I've been waiting for to know my left from right as far as ministering in this diocese," said Father Udoh. "In Nigeria, cul-

ture and religion go together. Religion pervades every aspect of life. Here, they are separate by law. Our opportunity to evangelize may not be to preach, but by the way the priest presents himself and stands for some value."

Of course, even such a broad, well-designed program can't cover everything. Father Udoh got his first culture shock as soon as he stepped off the plane last Dec. 28. "The snow!" he laughed. "We don't have that in my country!"

difficult acculturation can be. He confidently brought the problem to Sister Margaret John because "if you have an idea, she'll run with it. She's really dynamic." She didn't let him down, fleshing out the concept with her usual thorough, methodical brand of creativity.

"We interviewed international priests and their pastors to identify needs," she explained. "Then we reviewed existing programs — which didn't take long — and said yes."

"The program scope is broad, but very dif-

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"In Colombia, the Church is more conservative," countered Father Ayala. "Bishop, priests, deacon, community is the hierarchy. The priests leave with a deeper understanding of what's different here, which they believe can only help."

The project is the brainchild of Eugene Sullivan, former chairman of the SJU board of trustees, who learned firsthand from a foreign priest assigned to his parish how dif-