



**CATHOLIC
HOME
MISSIONS**

Faith Amidst the Oil Fields



Oil rig. Photo/Ron Schatz

By Beth Griffin

What happens when a rural area accustomed to losing its young adults to job opportunities in other states becomes an economic magnet almost overnight? The Diocese of Bismarck is finding out: an oil boom has drawn more than 9,000 newcomers to the diocese since 2007. And that's both a challenge and an opportunity for the Catholic Church. The general population has jumped to 290,000, and the number of

Catholics increased to almost 62,000.

Located in western North Dakota, the Diocese of Bismarck is caring for new arrivals, while maintaining its active ministry to longtime parishioners. Priests and laity say it's an exhilarating task with no precedent and that help from Catholic Home Missions is essential.

OIL BOOM

The oil boom of the 1980s was short-lived, so government and church officials were cautious in their initial responses to news that drillers had tapped into a supply that could last for 40–50 years.

Job seekers swarmed to North Dakota from every state and many foreign countries. The immediate effect was a housing crisis. Even now, there are not enough units for the people who need them and the prices have been driven up by demand. Houses are selling for as much as ten times their original

price. Fr. Russell Kovash, pastor of St. Joseph in Williston, says, "Apartment complexes are being built, but there are trailers and mobile homes in wheat fields and people living in their cars."

Oil workers who arrive without families are often housed in "man camps," which are commercially operated, makeshift villages that offer hot meals and temporary housing to mostly male residents exhausted from 12- to 16-hour shifts drilling oil.

A secondary effect of the boom is a job crisis, according to Ron Schatz, Director of Stewardship and Resource Development for the diocese. "People in low-paying jobs went to oil jobs, so McDonald's has to pay \$18 an hour for starting employees," he says. Some farmers have also left traditional agriculture for oil field jobs.

A CHANGING CULTURE

North Dakota is home to many people who trace their lineage to Germany and Norway. For genera-

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Neighbors

SPRING 2014

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM MISSION AMERICA

FROM THE CHAIRMAN



Dear Friends,

In this issue of *Neighbors*, we would like to share some of the challenges that the Diocese of Bismarck faces, as well as the blessings that

come with living through hardships in the light of faith.

Located in western North Dakota, Bismarck experiences extreme winter weather conditions. Parishes are located far apart, and many Catholics work in the oil fields and are not able to participate in parish life regularly, which makes ministry difficult. The diocese responds with several noteworthy programs, including Grief to Grace, which helps victims of abuse, and The Third Option, a program which helps struggling couples to heal their relationships and avoid divorce.

Seminary education and vocations remain a priority for the Diocese of Bismarck. However, educating seminarians places a significant financial burden on the diocese. A grant from Catholic Home Missions helps to alleviate these costs. Through the good work of their vocations director, Bismarck currently has twelve seminarians in formation.

This year, Catholic Home Missions is giving out \$8.45 million in grants to U.S. dioceses that lack the resources for basic pastoral ministries. **We are able to help only because of the generosity of Catholics like you who willingly give each year to the Catholic Home Missions Appeal.**

Most dioceses in the U.S. will take up this collection soon. Your generosity to this appeal will support vital ministries and provide an opportunity for each person living within our mission dioceses to meet and follow Christ. Please join me in supporting and promoting this year's collection.

I offer you my heartfelt thanks for your solidarity in prayer and financial assistance to strengthen the Church at home.

Yours in Christ,

Bishop Peter F. Christensen
Diocese of Superior

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tions, they made their living from the land, despite poor soil and limited irrigation. Newcomers drawn by the oil boom are changing the cultural landscape in both visible and harder-to-quantify ways.

Once-quiet towns now bustle with truck traffic and there are long lines in restaurants and grocery stores. Crime rates have nudged up. Both established North Dakotans and more recent arrivals have left after deciding that the conditions were not right for them.

The effect on parishes is palpable. There are new faces at Mass, but the people may not be there on a regular basis. Many have left spouses and families at home in a different state or country and may not have the time or inclination to become involved in parish life. Some of the long-time stalwart volunteers have sold their homes and moved to places where their grown children live.

"New people may or may not be Catholic. If they are, they may not register with the parish, because they're already supporting the family's parish at home. And they may not be as generous with their time, talent, and treasure as the families they replace," Ron says.

Fr. Brian Gross says at least 50 percent of his parishioners are new at the Church of the Epiphany in Watford City. Many experience stress on their marriage from the unrelenting weather or living in cramped, unfamiliar housing. "You have to think way outside the box in how you approach them pastorally. It's a great opportunity amid great challenges," he says.

Many of the newcomers are Hispanic in an area that has few Spanish-speaking people or Spanish-language liturgies. Ron says most Hispanics living in the area before the boom were bilingual. The diocese's experience with another large cultural group, Native Americans, does not

translate to the new need to serve Hispanics, because the Native Americans worship at parishes on two reservations, but the Latinos are geographically spread out, Ron says.

WELCOMING NEWCOMERS TO THE PARISH

Fr. Kovash says his parish has a growing number of people at the monthly Spanish-language Mass instituted in summer 2013. "It's an area where we need to focus attention, because some people speak little or no English. I'm grateful that my two associates know enough Spanish to offer Mass, but it's not the norm here," he says. The influx of people is "quite taxing on the parish," Fr. Kovash says, but parishioners are generous and he is excited for the opportunity to let the new arrivals "know about Jesus."

His church is a beacon for Catholics and non-Catholics alike. St. Joseph partners with the local Salvation Army and a Lutheran church to provide money for housing and medicine. Some newcomers find that unforgiving weather, cramped housing, or loneliness outweigh the economic benefits of a boom town job and decide to leave. The organizations also provide gas vouchers and bus tickets to help people return home. "We see a lot of tears," Father Kovash says.

A parish welcoming committee brings a basket and a smile to new arrivals and helps them acclimatize to living in western North Dakota in the winter. Bishop David D. Kagan of Bismarck says the diocese sees the rapid and widespread changes as an opportunity to evangelize newcomers "in the full meaning of the Gospel of Life—Jesus—and to welcome them into the Catholic culture of life."

Bishop Kagan points to the distribution of parish bulletins and Catholic CDs in the "man camps" and the efforts to adjust Mass and confession times to accommodate the workers as



Temporary housing units in a "man camp."
Photo/Ron Schatz

examples of effective ministries to newcomers. "Catholic Home Mission funds are a tremendous help to us to meet increasing demands for more religious education, especially better training for our volunteer teachers and better course materials," he says.

GROWING VOCATIONS

Bismarck also uses CHM funds for its robust vocations program, which is one of the brightest spots on the diocesan horizon. The average age of diocesan priests is 45 years old. Six men were ordained last year and there are twelve men now studying for the diocesan priesthood at three external seminaries. All but one of the candidates are "homegrown" North Dakotans and more than 75 percent are Catholic high school or college alumni.

"We are in the midst of a vocation boom, too," says Fr. Joshua Waltz, Vocations Director. "Chaplains, administrators, and delegates for Catholic education" are critical to vocations, after formation in a Christ-centered family, he says. "You have to have priests in your high schools. It's the seedbed where it all starts."

Father Waltz says he is taking advantage of social media to reach potential candidates for the priesthood. "The demographic is too big to ignore. Social media can be used for immense good,

but you have to be as smart as serpents and gentle as doves," he says. His own enthusiastic vocation story, told to a group of teens, is the first in a series of testimonial videos by deacons and priests posted on YouTube and already has 3,000 views.

He says living on campus and teaching a "Spirituality and Men and Women" course at the University of Mary in Bismarck is "a vocation director's dream come true," because he can teach, pray, eat, and snowboard with students, and encourage them to hear God's call for their future.

Father Waltz says CHM grants help offset costs for vocation formation and education. "You want seminarians to be praying and studying. You don't want financial worries hanging over their heads," he says. The changing face of western North Dakota inspires Father Kovash. "It's an exciting time to be a part of the Church!"



Newly ordained priests.



Seminarians prostrate in front of the altar during ordination.

DID YOU KNOW?

- The Diocese of Bismarck covers the 23 western counties of North Dakota and borders Canada, Montana, South Dakota, and the Diocese of Fargo.
- Travel across its 34,268 square miles is impacted severely from November to March, when temperatures are routinely below freezing and wind chills inspire dire warnings.
- There are 98 Catholic parishes and missions in the diocese. Many serve fewer than 200 families. Seventeen of the diocese's 23 counties have five or fewer parishes.
- The diocese includes two Indian reservations, each with several parishes.
- There are 11 Catholic elementary schools, three Catholic high schools, and one Catholic college, the University of Mary.
- The diocese is served by 43 active diocesan priests and 13 international priests, as well as men and women of the Order of St. Benedict. There are 79 permanent deacons.
- Twelve men are preparing for ordination at seminaries in Minneapolis, Washington, DC, Detroit, St. Louis, and Rome.
- Bismarck was established as a diocese by Pope St. Pius X on December 31, 1909.



Procession for the Feast of Corpus Christi.



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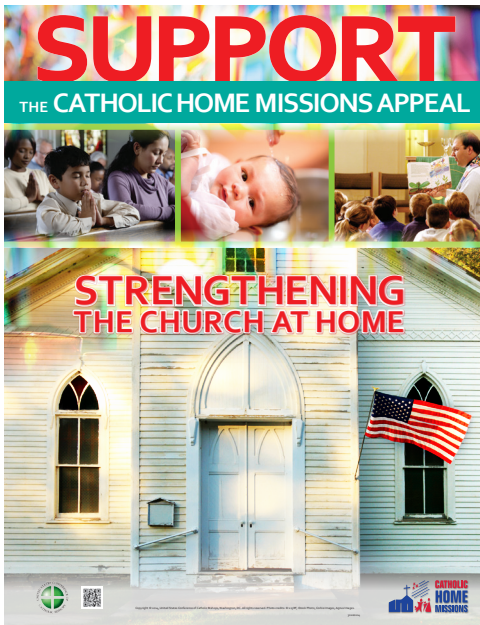
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AMIDST A CHANGING

culture introduced by the growing oil industry, the Diocese of Bismarck continues to minister to the needs of its people. Read more to learn how the diocese helps people to find faith in the challenging environment of North Dakota.



Your generosity to the Catholic Home Missions Appeal supports essential ministries in poor dioceses across the United States and its territories.

THANK YOU for being part of our efforts to strengthen the Church at home.

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