

## **THE CHURCH RESILIENT: CATHOLIC MISSIONS IN THE UNITED STATES**

By David M. Byers

### What Are the Home Missions?

“Home missions,” “home mission diocese,” “Home Mission America” are hardly household terms. They deserve to be better known, because the mission areas of the United States are willy-nilly leading the Church’s grace-charged march into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A home mission diocese is one that needs help providing Mass and sacraments, or religious education, or functioning parishes, for its Catholic population. A home mission parish is one belonging to such a diocese, and home mission territory or Home Mission America is the geography they cover.

### Appalachia and the South

If “home missions” conjures up any image at all in the minds of American Catholics, it is probably a small clapboard church up a holler in Appalachia or on a back street in a southern town. There is much truth to this image. The Diocese of Knoxville, which covers the eastern third of Tennessee, has the lowest Catholic population in the country, a little over two percent in 2000. In most parts of the United States, one of every five people you meet is Catholic. In the mountains of east Tennessee, that would be one person in 50. The reality is mostly the same in the other states of the South.

It is not just few Catholics that makes an area mission territory, but population is a critical factor. In theory, you can do a lot with a little, sustained by a powerful faith. In reality, if your Mississippi parish has only 50 families, half of which are elderly couples; if a young mother is the only teacher of religion for 20 children from kindergarten through high school; if the total offertory collection for the year is under \$25,000, then the Church looks quite different than it does in Manhattan or even in Des Moines. Your pastor is available for Mass and confessions and maybe a little counseling on Friday and Saturday, but then must move on to his home parish in the county seat. He relies on volunteers to handle daily administration, aid to the poor, relations with other local congregations, evangelization of white and black townspeople, and a range of other ministries.

### Alaska

These days, the circuit-riding Alaskan priest no longer has a dogsled, but he still travels by plane, boat or snowmobile to provide Mass and the sacraments to a scattered congregation. Pastoring in the great North remains

hard duty under harsh conditions. It is nearly a thousand miles from the headquarters of the Archdiocese of Anchorage to Dutch Harbor at the end of the Aleutian chain. The Diocese of Fairbanks consists of the city itself, population about 50,000, a string of Eskimo villages dotting the coast north and south of Nome, and 400,000 square miles of frozen wilderness. The seven diocesan priests of Juneau cover eleven parishes with the aid of three religious priests and three religious sisters. There are no roads in the diocese except for a few miles outside the city of Juneau. Most parishes are accessible only by air or water.

### The Military Services

The Committee on the Home Missions has been assisting the Archdiocese for the Military Services since World War II. The reason is straightforward. The archdiocese oversees all the Catholic chaplains in the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, the Coast Guard and in VA Medical Centers. Perhaps one-third of all active-duty soldiers and sailors are Catholics, many of them Hispanics. Wherever they are--at home or on military bases and ships around the world--these men and women need pastoral care. Chaplains lead worship, perform sacraments, counsel, and offer a comforting presence to young people cut off from home and parish and, sometimes, from virtually all reminders of their religious heritage. Wartime postings to Iraq and Afghanistan greatly aggravate an already difficult situation.

### The Territories

The deepest home mission fields are not in continental North America at all. They are U.S. territories or former territories, annexed or captured in war. Puerto Rico in the Caribbean, sun-splashed but grindingly poor, is officially 80 to 90 percent Catholic, but an estimated 10 percent attend Mass regularly. The Virgin Islands, home mostly to West Indian blacks and regularly assaulted by tropical storms, are poor and dependent; fully eighty percent of its citizens work in the tourist trade. About one-third of the islanders are Catholic, organized into eight parishes on four inhabited islands.

The Pacific missions are varied and colorful. Guam and Saipan in the Marianas, don't look much different than modest sections of Florida. But most of Micronesia is distinctly Third World. Grit, dilapidation and the dripping rain forest are virtually universal. Besides the usual range of pastoral problems, missionaries and indigenous church leaders must deal with widespread poverty, an uneducated laity, and the need to evangelize a culture quite alien by Western standards. And it is hot and humid year round, even at night.

The Church barely has a presence in some places. There are only four priests, three of them U.S. Jesuits, in the Marshall Islands, an independent country just north of the Equator. The prefect apostolic (equivalent to a bishop)

is pastor of eight parishes in the “outer islands,” which he visits as time, transportation and weather permits. The Diocese of the Caroline Islands actually covers two different countries, Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia, which is itself composed of four island groups. Two resident priests serve the six-island nation of Palau. The pastor responsible for the villages that dot the coast of Babeldoab, the largest island, can only make his circuit three or four times a year. The rest of the time, lay catechists administer parishes and travel a couple of hours each way to bring back consecrated hosts for Eucharistic services.

### The Rocky Mountain States

The Rocky Mountain states may replace Appalachia and the South as the poster child for Home Mission America. The urbanization that is drawing prosperous Catholic Yankees south is emptying the U.S. countryside farther west. At the same time, the shortage of clergy and religious is reaching crisis proportions, with priests doing their best to serve two or three parishes at once, sometimes into advanced age. The Diocese of Cheyenne, for example, covers the state of Wyoming. Thirty-two active diocesan priests serve 50,000 Catholics scattered over 100,000 square miles of high plains. A pastor might drive hundreds of miles each weekend to say Mass at several locations before returning to take up regular duties at his home parish. It is a lonely and difficult life, especially in winter when the roads become dangerous.

Religious education also illustrates the Church’s growing problems in the mountain states. In the three contiguous states of Wyoming, Montana and Idaho, there is a total of seven Catholic high schools. Unless you live in one of the few cities in this vast terrain, getting your child a Catholic education will be quite a challenge. Of course, all but the smallest parishes offer religious education programs of their own; the volunteers who act as administrators and teachers perform a wonderful service to the next generation. However, many places are hundreds of miles from the chancery. The diocese may offer an annual conference for catechists and a range of training programs as well, but taking advantage of these opportunities is often impossible.

### La Frontera

Catholic dioceses along the Mexican border in Texas, New Mexico and Arizona have long been part of Mission Territory. However, recent years have seen a remarkable development in the quality and quantity of church life here. The most obvious change is the growth in Catholic Spanish-speaking immigrants.

The Church’s evangelizing mandate is to gather all people to God, and the border states are certainly a field ready for harvest. However, it is hard to adequately serve people’s needs when personnel and resources are in short supply, and when numbers are simply overwhelming. If Our Lady of Guadalupe

Parish creates a religious education program for 1,000 children and 2,000 unexpectedly register, the parish leadership must scramble to adjust. Moreover, the teacher corps must cope with English speakers, Spanish speakers, and kids who are bilingual to one degree or another. If despite its best efforts the parish cannot respond to people's satisfaction, the Church risks losing disgruntled families. Many turn to evangelical sects whose straightforward organization, doctrinal simplicity, and ample volunteers spell superior flexibility.

### Home Missions and the Church in the United States

What the home missions offer the wider Church in the United States is a glimpse of its future, and perhaps some experience in coping. Whether they wanted to or not--and they usually didn't--the missions have become the test sites for building strong, self-reliant Catholic communities under trying, unstable conditions. The diminishing presence of priests and sisters, the concomitant rise of lay ministry, and the exploding Hispanic presence have created new conditions in the missions that will soon spread to the more prosperous parts of the Church.

As this dynamic unfolds in coming decades, the creativity, practicality and resilience of mission bishops, priests and laity should make them useful models to imitate. At the very least, their experience will alert the rest of the Church that changing times require adaptation and adjustment in pastoral practice. Dr. William Dinges of the Catholic University of America recently visited ten mission dioceses in the United States. He concluded: "One visionary perspective I encountered in the course of my research stands out.... Traditionally, a mission diocese [was] a place looking for a handout..., a place...constantly in need. The new vision [is of] a *missionary* diocese, a place where all Catholics are challenged to assume a new responsibility for renewal and ownership in the Church."

### Sidebar

- (1) Hispanics are changing the face of the Church across the country, but especially along the Mexican border. The Catholic population of the Diocese of El Paso is about 650,000; of Brownsville, 750,000; of Laredo, 220,000; of San Antonio, 680,000; of Las Cruces, 130,000; of Tucson, about 300,000. In some cases, these figures are growing rapidly. The number of Brownsville Catholics is up about 200,000 since 1990, while the count in El Paso has risen 130,000.
- (2) The Catholic population of southern Alabama is 4 percent, of northern Mississippi 2.4 percent, of Arkansas about 5 percent, of south and central Georgia 3 percent, of western Kentucky 6.4 percent, of Louisiana north of Cajun country about 9 percent, of South Carolina 3.2 percent.

- (3) The clergy shortage that plagues mission territory is even more pronounced in the armed services. The Military Archdiocese has 366 full-time and 400 part-time chaplains to serve 375,000 Catholic men and women on active duty, 820,000 family members, and 204,000 Reserves and National Guard troops. The armed services are “mission territory” from a Catholic perspective because the Church calls on a relative handful of priests to give pastoral care to young, largely uncatechized, vulnerable people, thousands of whom face mortal danger in strange lands.
- (4) A count of priests and parishes starting at the Mexican border and moving through the Rockies to Canada yields startling results: 185 active diocesan priests to staff 527 parishes and missions. Clearly, the Catholic Church would dry up in some towns, even some counties, if lay Catholics did not take over church responsibilities priests and sisters used to handle.