

## **THE CREATIVE EDGE: CATHOLIC MISSIONS IN THE UNITED STATES**

By David M. Byers

### What Are the Home Missions?

In 2002, the Bishops' Committee on the Home Missions asked Dr. William Dinges of the Catholic University of America to visit ten mission dioceses in the United States and describe the reality he saw. He was also to ponder his experience and to comment on Home Mission America as a whole. How does the Catholic Church look from what most Americans think of as the boondocks? How does it differ from the well-established, relatively comfortable church today's Catholics in the Northeast, the Midwest and on the Pacific Coast have always known?

Dr. Dinges offers the following summation: "Roman Catholicism in the United States is in a new social and cultural situation. New ways of 'being church' are emerging. Nowhere is this more obvious than in home mission dioceses. The growing Latino presence, widening clerical shortage, and expanding embrace of lay ministry which are so pronounced in many of these dioceses have profound and long-term implications for the future of the Church as a whole."

"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. For decades, these areas have languished obscurely at the edge of the Catholic world. But given the proper conditions, living on the edge is a vitalizing experience. The unknown may be only a step away, but at least you have a clear view of the terrain you have no choice but to cross.

A home mission diocese is one that needs help providing Mass and sacraments, or religious education, or functioning parishes, to Catholics. 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 still 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. To give this bland figure flesh, 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 Confederacy, and in the border state of Kentucky. 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.

It is not just few Catholics that makes an area mission territory, but that 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. Your son might be the only Catholic in his sixth-grade class, and fitting in with the Baptist and Methodist kids can be tricky. The 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

Catholics who receive the Alaskan Shepherd appeal every year have another image of Home Mission America: keeping Father on the trail as he mashes from one remote outpost to another. These days, the circuit-riding Alaskan priest still travels to provide Mass and the sacraments to a scattered congregation, but he flies, takes a ferry or, if necessary, rides a snowmobile. Still, pastoring in the great North remains hard duty under harsh conditions. It is 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 both in rural areas and the inner cities, is officially 80 to 90 percent Catholic, but an estimated 10 percent attend Mass regularly. Evangelical churches have been active and successful on the island throughout the

twentieth century, making pastoral life extremely difficult for overworked priests. 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.

Many of the Pacific missions are quite exotic. Guam and Saipan in the Marianas, with their neat new parish churches, tourist accommodations, middle-class housing and abundant shopping, don't look much different than modest sections of Florida. But the rest of Micronesia, with the partial exception of Palau, is distinctly Third World. One- or two-story concrete block houses, unpainted and capped with rusty tin roofs, represent the upper end in real estate; the lower end is tarpaper and plywood shacks. 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 that can seem 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 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 distinct cultures on four island groups. Providing even the simplest pastoral services is difficult. For example, there are only two resident priests in 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 travel a couple of hours each way to bring back consecrated hosts for Eucharistic services.

### The Rocky Mountain States

In the last few decades, home mission territory has broadened with demographic and economic shifts. Nowhere is change greater than in the Rocky Mountain states, which bid fair to 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 again. It is a lonely and difficult existence, especially in winter when the roads become dangerous. Nor is his plight unusual. 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.

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 in the number of Catholic Spanish-speaking immigrants. While "mission" is associated with a small, scattered Catholic population in the Rocky Mountain states, the opposite is true in Texas. 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.

In many ways, that is a wonderful problem to have. The Church's evangelizing mandate is to gather all people to God, and the border states are certainly a field ready for harvest. However, you can't adequately serve people's spiritual and physical needs when there is little time to plan, when personnel and resources are in short supply, and when you are simply overwhelmed by numbers. 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. Consider further that your constituency has special characteristics. For example, your teacher corps must be able to cope with English speakers, Spanish speakers, and tons of 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 a lot of disgruntled families. Many turn to evangelical sects whose straightforward organization, doctrinal simplicity, and ample volunteers spell superior flexibility. In the past few decades, *la frontera* has grown a new culture and challenges the Church to respond.

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

What the home missions offer the rest of the 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. As Dr. Dinges notes, the diminishing presence of priests and sisters, the concomitant rise of lay ministry, and the exploding Hispanic presence, created new conditions in the missions that will soon spread to the more prosperous parts of the Church. Many dioceses across the country will begin feeling the stresses that now trouble mission dioceses. Small towns in Pennsylvania and Connecticut will lose their pastors; parishes in California will group into clusters or close; religious education will inevitably become the work of lay people.

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. Dinges notes: "One visionary perspective I encountered in the course of my research stands out. It is a vision that shifts how the Church understands the term 'mission diocese.' Traditionally, a mission diocese [was] a place looking for a handout, a place with a welfare mentality, a place that [was] deficient, mediocre and 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."