

ENTRE AMIGOS – Opinion column

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The priest who did not have a missionary spirit

By Mar Muñoz-Visoso

Early in my former life as director of Hispanic ministry, I was entrusted with the task of taking a newly arrived immigrant priest to his assignment at a mountain town two hours from Denver.

The man, about 50, had seemingly heard the call by our newly installed archbishop asking that Latin American bishops consider the archdiocese as mission land. The rapid growth of the Spanish-speaking population was overwhelming for what was then only a few Hispanic priests in the diocese, and it was taking a toll on the goodwill of those who spoke some Spanish.

The priest had been informed before arrival about his new assignment. Upon arrival, however, it was evident the idea he had of pastoral needs and how to go about his ministry had little to do with U.S. reality.

The affable greeting at the airport turned into a worrisome face as we started to get away from the city and I began to explain the characteristics of his new flock: an incipient community with a large Hispanic population in the area; a high number of males, who worked mostly in construction and the service industry. Many were undocumented immigrants; they lived dispersed throughout valley. The local pastor had done his best to learn Spanish.

There was a big need to reach out to the people and invite them in. Given the distances, and the fact that many had more than one job, the pastoral work would require a good dose of determination and creativity.

As we got out of the car, the priest decided to let his discomfort out. He said he was used to daytime office hours—he was a pastor in his city—and moreover, he did not consider going around knocking on doors worthy of a Catholic priest.

I picked up my jaw from the floor and babbled back: “But Father, Jesus himself walked through the villages and towns preaching the Gospel and calling people to follow him.” He insisted he wanted an assignment in Denver.

I encouraged him to give it about fifteen days or so, to get to know the congregation and have a feel for the work ahead. If he still was unhappy, he could ask the archbishop for a different assignment. I offered to help him as much as I could.

That was the last time I saw him. Exactly two weeks later I received an urgent call from the pastor letting us know that the priest was on his way to the airport to return to Mexico. He did not say goodbye.

We learned much with this episode. The protocols to admit and assign foreign priests in the archdiocese certainly changed; and this priest's attitude remained in my memory as the opposite of a missionary spirit, especially because it contrasted with those of the majority of priests I know—and I've work with a few.

So many more of them, local or imported, work day in and day out—no matter the hours, or where they need to go to find their sheep—so that the people won't lack access to the sacraments, good advice, a word of consolation, or a voice claiming justice.

However, I have also seen too many priests burn out due to the lack of rest, time for prayer, priestly fraternal bonds and solitude.

We admire our priests, but we often take them for granted too. In this Year for Priests, that now begins under the theme “The missionary identity of the priest in the Church,” let us pray for our priests and let us find ways to accompany them in their journey of faith and ministry. Benedict XVI reminds us that this missionary identity of the priest is an “intrinsic dimension” for the exercise of their call. A Catholic priest without a missionary spirit is thus a contradiction in terms.

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