



United States
Conference of
Catholic Bishops

NEIGHBORS

A Quarterly Newsletter from Mission America

Fr. Glenn Whewell (left) and Director of Vocations Fr. Brian Hess (right) with Sr. Desiree Barron after her first vows with the Salesian Sisters of St. John Bosco.



Catholic Home Missions scholarships enable vocation directors from home mission dioceses and eparchies to grow and develop in their ministry of fostering priestly vocations at the annual National Conference of Diocesan Vocation Directors convention.

Diocesan Vocation Directors Build Connections with Help from Catholic Home Missions

By Rhina Guidos

Rosemary Sullivan knows a lot about vocations to diocesan priesthood—and not just because her son is a priest. The bulk of her knowledge has come from decades with the National Conference of Diocesan Vocation Directors (NCDVD), where she has been the executive director since 2009.

“Put a mother in charge, she gets things done,” she jokes.

She said she’s proud of her work with the NCDVD, which since 1962 has provided formation, support, and advocacy resources for diocesan vocation directors in the United States—as well as Canada, Mexico, Australia, and Germany. But she’s particularly proud of the annual conference that brings together nearly 300 vocation directors to talk, pray, and bond.

“When you’re in a room with like-minded people, it’s a shared experience, even though it’s slightly different from diocese to diocese. Connection is very important,” she said.

Vocation directors in smaller dioceses—like those supported by Catholic Home

Missions—can find that connection at the annual conference difficult to afford. Smaller dioceses have fewer resources to support special programs and ministries. The conference cost involves not only registration fees but also the higher costs of flying out of rural areas as well as paying for hotels, food, and sometimes transportation to and from an airport.

“I live in northeast Wyoming, so for me to get to an airport, I have to drive an hour and a half over to Rapid City, South Dakota, to an airport where I get connected to a big hub, and there I can make it to where I need to get to,” said Fr. Brian Hess, vocation director for the Diocese of Cheyenne.

Thanks to Catholic Home Missions, Fr. Brian and other vocation directors from mission dioceses don’t have to miss out. Scholarships funded by the Catholic Home Missions Appeal allow them to cover costs related to NCDVD’s annual conference.

“For mission dioceses, what Catholic Home Missions does is provide the funding that they don’t have in the same way that their brothers in other dioceses with healthier budgets have,” Rosemary said.

FROM THE CHAIRMAN



Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,
Diocesan vocation directors exercise a special ministry in the Church by inviting young men to “put out into deep water” and consider the possibility that the Lord is calling

them to the priesthood. The work of growing priestly vocations requires not only dedication and the ability to build social connections, but also spiritual strength to accompany others while remaining grounded in faith.

The National Conference of Diocesan Vocation Directors provides resources and formation for these directors, especially through its annual conference, where nearly 300 vocation directors come together to meet one another, share experiences, and pray together. The costs of travel, lodging, and registration for events like the annual conference can present an obstacle for vocation directors from home mission dioceses and eparchies, which have limited resources.

In this issue of *Neighbors*, you will see how scholarship funds from Catholic Home Missions enable mission dioceses and eparchies in the United States to overcome those obstacles and provide their vocation directors with the opportunity to participate in this event, which helps them grow and develop in their ministry to encourage new generations of men to answer God’s call to the priesthood.

Your support for the Catholic Home Missions Appeal helps more than 70 dioceses and eparchies provide ministries to the faithful today while also growing and strengthening them for the future. With gratitude for your ongoing commitment to the Catholic Home Missions Appeal that enables us to support such initiatives, I remain

Yours in Christ,

Chad W. Zielinski

Most Reverend Chad W. Zielinski
Bishop of New Ulm
Chairman, USCCB Subcommittee on
Catholic Home Missions



A seminary visit weekend begins in prayer at Mass.

Fr. Brian said in his three years as vocation director, he has gained helpful information and practices at each year’s conference, resources that have helped him grow in his role. But the best part is building friendships, especially through the shared prayers that bring directors together.

“We don’t need to spend the entire time in business and meetings and heady stuff. We need to spend time in the heart. So we take at least a half day of the conference just for prayer,” he said. “You pick the workshops and the seminars that are going to be most useful to you. Those range from different vocation promotion ideas to different ways to work with your seminarians or different ways to interface with the seminaries.”

Fr. Elias Dorham, who has been vocation director for the Melkite Catholic Eparchy of Newton, Massachusetts, for a little over a year, said he too attended the conference with help from the appeal.

“Just sponsoring me to be able to go to the conference was a big deal. I don’t know if I would have done so otherwise,” he said. “There’s all sorts of resources that I now have access to.”

The conference also connected him with others from the Eastern Catholic Church in the United States—“something I wouldn’t have done . . . if I hadn’t been there,” he said.

Likewise, Fr. Brian said a highlight was spending time with his counterparts.

“It’s a chance to connect with guys who are in the same boat, other priests who are engaged in the same work. They understand the same struggles,” said Fr. Brian.

“We exchanged contact information, which was really good,” added Fr. Elias. Though vocation directors share some experiences in common, complex situations face dioceses like Fr. Brian’s. The Diocese of Cheyenne serves the entire state of Wyoming, an area of more than 97,000 square miles. Like a lot of mission dioceses, it has few priests, who each must take up many tasks.

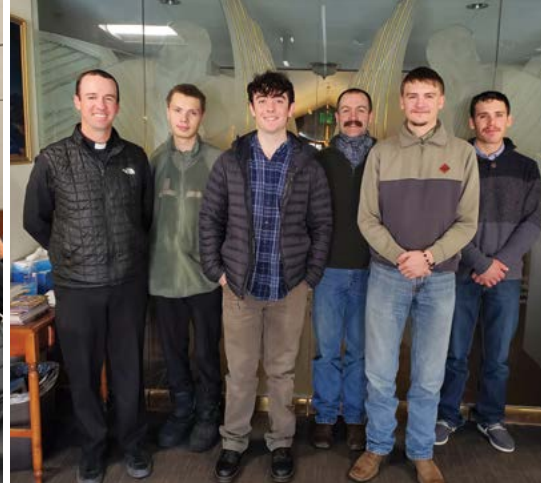
Fr. Brian is not just a vocation director but also a pastor at three small parishes. “I live at one, and I go to the other two on the weekends,” he said.

That means he must find creative ways to fulfill his vocation director role. Unlike larger dioceses, whose vocation directors can draw on large population centers and a significant pool of candidates, Fr. Brian’s largest population center is Cheyenne, with just around 65,000 residents. Access to fewer candidates for priesthood has led him to look beyond Wyoming’s borders.

“Half of our seminarians right now are actually from out of state. Men who have found their way here through college, and they find a home here,” he said. “And [Wyoming] is where they discern their vocation. We’re still a missionary territory that relies on a great deal of help from outside of our diocese.”

Fr. Brian knows he’s not alone in facing the challenges. Talking with other vocation directors has helped him come up with strategies tailored to mission territories.

“It’s a challenge because of the distances to travel, to meet with young men, and there’s a need to utilize the technology that’s available to us by Zoom and everything,” he continued. “It’s a blessing, but



Left: Vocation directors from around the country participate in a Eucharistic procession during the NCDVD in August 2024. **Center:** Country meets city: Fr. Brian (left) and Theresa Meuer (right) from the Diocese of Cheyenne hang out with Fr. Tim Monahan, director of vocations of the Archdiocese of Chicago (center). **Right:** Fr. Brian (left), director of vocations for the Diocese of Cheyenne, stands with several young men visiting the seminary.

there's a sacrifice in not being able to meet with people face-to-face."

Technology does help ease the sense of isolation experienced by vocation directors in mission territories.

"I think in any diocese you can feel a little bit isolated because you're the only priest in the diocese who's doing that work," Fr. Brian said. "The vocation director in a rural diocese like Cheyenne can feel all the more isolated. By way of example of how big our diocese is, I'm three and a half hours [driving] from our chancery, and our bishop in Cheyenne. In my 10 years of priesthood, that's the closest I've lived to the chancery."

Fr. Elias said his territory spans the entire United States. He is part of a team of six charged with creating a "vocations pipeline." The conference helped him refine that process, as he was able to talk to others about similar challenges.

"There are 23 different self-governing churches that are Eastern churches. Sometimes a lot of the vocations materials and resources have to be tailored slightly just for us," he said. For Fr. Brian, the conference's gatherings for directors of similar-sized dioceses has proved invaluable.

"I've been very grateful for these conversations with other vocation directors from small dioceses, rural dioceses. Some of them are in the same position: You don't have a Catholic college. You don't have a Catholic high school. You don't have major population centers to draw from. I've been very grateful, even for the chance to commiserate on the challenge with other vocation directors, and then to do some idea-sharing about how to operate in rural contexts," he said.

The experience spreads beyond the time they spend at the conference.

"Catholic Home Missions is helping in the work of vocations, but something that everyone in the Church has to realize is that vocations work is everyone's responsibility. If you see a young [person] that you think may be called to appreciate religious life, don't hesitate to say something to them, [to] encourage them to consider discerning."

Fr. Elias said that exchanging contact information led to joining other directors later in the year on a silent retreat, a "life-changing" event that has helped with his work, he said.

"It really refreshed me in my vocation, not only as a priest, but as a vocation director," he said.

And that's a great benefit, Rosemary said. Past participants call upon one another, provide information that others may not have heard of, pray together, and form community, including those from mission dioceses.

"For these guys from mission territories, this is a lifeline for them. Oh, it's a huge deal for them [to be able to attend]," Rosemary said. "And NCDVD is grateful to Catholic Home Missions for their support of the vocation directors. Because if you want to talk about moving the needle, this is moving the needle. And it's moving the needle not just for vocations. It's moving the needle because they're supporting them as priests. And if you ever want to make a difference in vocations, you need people who have healthy spiritual lives."

Rosemary said that the NCDVD won't turn away anyone who is interested in the conference. The organization has always tried to find funding for those who want to attend. The proof of its success is found in those like Fr. Brian and Fr. Elias, who can attest to the richness the conference offers for those trying to carry out a major responsibility.

That experience is something Fr. Brian said he treasures and also encourages others to take part in.

"I just want to express my gratitude to the Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions and the donors of the Catholic Home Missions Appeal that make these scholarships possible," he said.

For Fr. Elias, the experience was so profound that he told his bishop that attendance should be mandatory for anyone assuming the role of a vocation director.

"It's been very impactful," he said. "Catholic Home Missions is helping in the work of vocations, but something that everyone in the Church has to realize is that vocations work is everyone's responsibility. If you see a young [person] that you think may be called to appreciate religious life, don't hesitate to say something to them, [to] encourage them to consider discerning." 🕊



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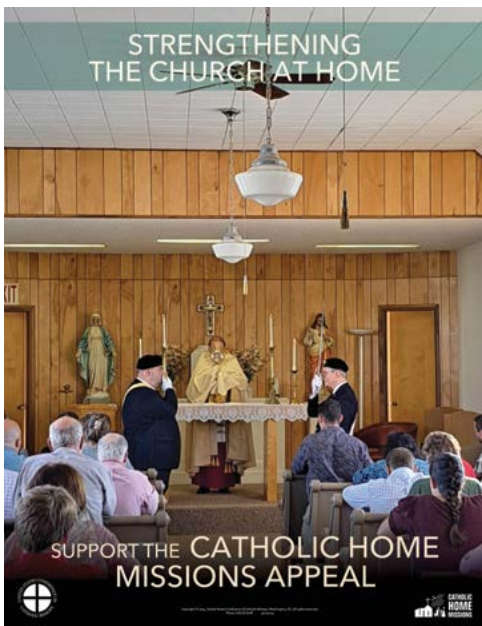
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Pope Francis appointed two Catholic Home Missions Bishops, Most Rev. Michael G. McGovern, currently of Belleville, IL and Most Rev. W. Shawn McKnight, SThD of Jefferson City, MO to the Archdiocese of Omaha and the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas, respectively. Please pray for them as they begin serving in their new sees.



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