

neighbors

SPRING 2009

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM MISSION AMERICA

SEMINARIANS PREPARE TO SERVE *Mission Dioceses*



Every man who will be ordained to the priesthood in the United States in the next few years knows that he is one of a small number called by God to serve the growing Church in the United States. Seminarians preparing for life in home mission dioceses also know that they face the additional challenges of chronic poverty among their parishioners, vast

distances between their parishes, the possibility of hostility toward Catholics, and the likelihood of being the only priest for miles around.

And they can't wait to get started!

The Catholic Home Missions Appeal supports seminarians studying to be priests in 46 underserved dioceses. When the men who tell their stories below are ordained, they

will serve in these mission dioceses: Bismarck, North Dakota; Lake Charles, Louisiana; the Maronite Eparchy of St. Maron in Brooklyn, New York; and Brownsville, Texas.

Russ Kovash says, "The Lord has a strange way of drawing people to himself. God used reverse psychology on me. He kept blessing me and lavishing

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FROM THE CHAIRMAN

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DEAR FRIENDS,

Throughout the Deep South, Appalachia, the Rocky Mountains, the Southwest, and Alaska, the shortage of priests is a growing challenge. This shortage is keenly felt in mission dioceses as diverse as Brownsville, Texas, where parishes are bursting at the seams with people, and Anchorage, Alaska, with its small and isolated mission parishes.

The Diocese of Brownsville has one of the largest Catholic populations of all dioceses in the United States. The 4,230-square-mile diocese, in one of the country's poorest regions, serves nearly 995,160 Catholics with only about 115 priests.

The Archdiocese of Anchorage, with a much smaller Catholic population of 11,500, feels the strain in different ways, with only 25 active priests serving a 138,985-square-mile territory. Twelve of its 29 parishes and outlying missions operate without a resident priest. They are run by pastoral administrators and are visited by diocesan priests twice a month for Mass—weather permitting.

In mission dioceses of the United States, where funding is often limited, the call to educate and encourage future priests is an additional challenge. Since a year of training and education for a future priest can cost up to \$25,000, mission dioceses often turn to the bishops' Subcommittee on the Home Missions for financial assistance. Over the past 10 years, we have been able to allocate more than **\$11.5 million** to help Catholic mission dioceses in poorer communities to recruit, train, and educate seminarians.

Scheduled nationally for the weekend of **April 25-26, 2009**, the **Catholic Home Missions Appeal** supports the training of future priests who will provide Mass, sacraments, and religious education for their people. We once again invite Catholics in America, through their generosity, to help bring a new generation of priests to our home mission dioceses. On behalf of our Catholics in mission America who rely upon your gifts, we thank you!

Most Rev. Michael W. Warfel
Bishop of Great Falls-Billings
Chairman, USCCB Subcommittee
on Catholic Home Missions

The **USCCB Committee on National Collections**, through its **Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions**, provides financial support for missionary activities that strengthen and extend the presence of the Church in the United States and its island territories in the Caribbean and the Pacific.

me with his love. I wasn't unhappy, but I knew there was something missing."

Russ had been drawn to the priesthood, and particularly to preaching, since he was in the 12th grade. He didn't act on the call then, but he never ruled it out, even as he developed an insurance and financial services business in his home state of North Dakota and ran it successfully for 16 years.

When he discerned his vocation in his late 30s, he considered joining a religious order whose charism is preaching parish missions, but he ultimately chose the diocesan priesthood. "It's a soft pillow to lay your head on at night when you know you're doing what the Lord is calling you to do," he says. "I hope the Lord can use me to make a difference."

Russ, now 43, is studying at Kenrick-Glennon Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, and will be ordained in the summer of 2009. He says he is excited to go back home to a rural area, Bismarck. "Our big towns are still small towns," he says. "There are a lot of people who are very much on fire with the faith. I look forward to working with them to spread the faith."



Ruben Villareal comes from Hathaway, Louisiana, in the Diocese of Lake Charles. His hometown has a single school that educates 480 students from kindergarten through 12th grade. He was one of 34 students in his graduating class.

During his final two years in high school, Ruben began to discern his vocation. By graduation, he was ready to go to St. Joseph's Seminary College in Covington. After two years studying philosophy and liberal arts, he is now in the Basselin program at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. The accelerated scholarship program leads to a bachelor's and master's degree in philosophy within three years.

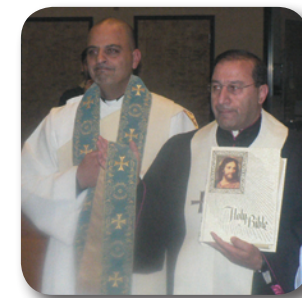
The 21-year-old seminarian is looking forward to serving in Lake Charles. "I think it will be a great joy to me to celebrate Mass and provide the sacraments to the People of God," he says.



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Ruben, whose father is Hispanic, adds, "I think that as the number of Hispanic Catholics continues to grow in the Church in America, it only makes sense that we also find growth in the number of Hispanic seminarians. I find it to be a great sign of the life of faith in these communities as well as the Church's response to nourish that faith."

Vincent Farhat is the youngest of ten children of a family in Lansing, Michigan.



At 17, he had told his parents he thought he wanted to become a priest. They were supportive, but also reminded him that the priesthood is a difficult life. At that time, he says, he felt he wasn't worthy enough, and no one in the priesthood was giving him a push.

He moved to Florida to finish college and worked in restaurant management and finance. A homily he heard more than 20 years after he had first considered his vocation "changed my whole way of thinking," he says. Vince contacted his bishop, who assured him that it was not too late to enter the seminary.



From 1998 to 2008, the Subcommittee on the Home Missions allocated more than \$11.5 million in grants for future priests in mission America.

The Catholic Home Missions Appeal, taken in most parishes the weekend of April 25-26, is an opportunity for parishioners in the United States to support fellow Catholics right here in our own country. The funds donated through the Appeal allow parishes in poorer communities to keep their doors open, provide the sacraments, and support seminarians.

Please be generous in your parish appeal.

Vince says his goal is "to bring people closer to Jesus and to make God the center of their lives," either at an established parish or at a mission.

He adds, "I hope I can reach people who have left the Catholic Church." He would also like to encourage vocations among men and women and reach out to them in such a way that "the light of Christ will ignite in their hearts."

Vince, now 45, is studying at Our Lady of Lebanon Seminary in Washington, D.C., and will be ordained to the diaconate in the summer of 2009 and to the priesthood in May 2010.

Alejandro Flores was raised in Mission, Texas, in the Diocese of Brownsville. He credits his parents and his parish with nurturing his vocation. He says, "My parents

showed by their lives that faith was very important. I grew up kitty-corner to my home parish and was able to see the life of the parish unfold before me."

Alejandro, 26, recalls that in a vocational course in high school, he determined he could be either a teacher or a priest. He attended

a new diocesan minor seminary after high school and is now studying at Mundelein Seminary in Illinois. He will be ordained in May of 2009 and is looking forward to serving his home diocese.

Alejandro describes Brownsville as a crossroads between the United States and Mexico. He jokes that he is "one-and-a-half-lingual" and says he



is working on his Spanish. He hopes to "bring the Church to the people, to expand beyond the borders of the parish property to help the members live fully Christian lives."

Alejandro says vocations in his diocese are growing. "There are a lot of priests from Mexico," he says, "and that is very helpful, but I am praying for more local vocations." His family's vocation prayers must be powerful: Alejandro's uncle is a priest in the Diocese of Galveston-Houston.

BY BETH GRIFFIN

Photos courtesy of Catholic Home Missions and subjects: p. 1, A priest serving in a mission diocese; p. 2, Russ Kovash, Ruben Villareal; p. 3, clockwise, Vincent Farhat, Alejandro Flores, Alejandro Flores.



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Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions

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United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

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In this issue . . .

Met four seminarians studying to serve our home mission Dioceses of Brownsville, Bismarck, Lake Charles, and the Maronite Eparchy of St. Maron in Brooklyn. Though their futures in the poorer dioceses are going to be difficult, these seminarians are enthusiastic about serving the Church in the areas of the United States where their service is most needed. Read about why they decided to enter the priesthood and how they will make a difference. For more information about the home mission dioceses in the United States, please visit www.usccb.org/hm.

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Please give generously to the Catholic Home Missions Appeal in your parish. You may also send your donation to this address:

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