



“Priest Assignments”

Two years ago this summer, in my first months as bishop, several of our international priests left the Diocese of Baker for further studies or pastoral work elsewhere at the direction of their bishop or religious superior. Their departure set in motion a major reshuffling of priestly assignments in the course of 2012. Eight parishes – Lakeview, Merrill, Ontario, La Pine, Hermiston, Heppner, John Day, and Pilot Rock– received new pastors or new assistants.

This summer, after a relatively uneventful 2013, nine parishes have undergone a similar turnover: La Grande, Enterprise, Merrill, Chiloquin, Pendleton, Heppner, Hermiston, Madras, Klamath Falls (St. Pius X), and John Day. That’s a lot of uprooting all at once. What’s behind it?

Two very significant vacancies opened up in March when the Nigerian Superior General of the Sons of Mary Mother of Mercy assigned Father Christopher Agoha of La Grande to initiate a new military chaplaincy program for their order beginning in February 2015. The superior General likewise named Father Gabriel Ezeh of Hermiston to become pastor in San Bernardino, California, this July. Then came an opening in Chiloquin as Father Innocent Diala’s five-year term of service in the Baker Diocese ended and he left to take a parish in Buffalo, New York. Finally, Father Bailey Clemens in Pendleton requested and has been granted a sabbatical.

A falling-domino effect ensued. To replace Fathers Agoha, Ezeh, Diala, and Clemens, priests had to leave other parishes, which created new vacancies, which in turn had to be filled by priests from other parishes or from outside the Diocese. And the process will not be complete for at least a month or two more when two new international priests arrive to close the circle of open parishes.

Here, as in many American dioceses these days, a decisive factor in the placement of clergy is the urgent need for native Spanish-speaking priests in parishes with a particularly large Hispanic population. In that category Hermiston clearly ranks first. Father Luis Flores-Alva graciously consented to move there from Madras, because we have more Spanish-speaking priests available in Central Oregon than up north by the Washington border. We may hope to meet this need more adequately from “home-grown” priestly resources in the future, since our seminarians are trained to work in both English and Spanish.

The Baker Diocese is blessed indeed by the generosity of priests who leave family, friends, and homeland and come across the world to help us save our souls. It was true sixty years ago when I was a boy, and it is still true today. Grateful we must always be that God inspires the Church abroad to provide for us. But we must also strive to provide priests for ourselves. We have prayed God to call men to the priesthood, and He has answered with the seminarians we have today. He will surely continue to call if we continue to pray.