

February 2006



Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle

Workers for the Harvest: Overseas Priests in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle

Using this Discussion Paper

The Discussion Paper

This Discussion Paper was commissioned and prepared for distribution in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle.

It comes as the result of Recommendation 5.3 that was accepted by the Diocesan Leadership Group (which met on May 20, 2004) and passed onto the Diocesan Pastoral Council for action.

Recommendation 5.3 states:

“In response to what we have heard God’s people say, and as a means of empowering them to participate fully in Christ’s mission, the DPC is to commission an individual or group, with a mandate to develop a brief, user-friendly, catechetical resource to assist and support communities in continuing their exploration and discussion of the theological and pastoral issues involved in the question of inviting overseas priests into parish ministry.”

The purpose of this paper is to raise some of the issues, theological and practical, associated with the possibility of the Diocese issuing an invitation to priests from overseas to minister among us.

Using the Discussion Paper

This paper is designed as a Discussion Starter. It doesn't raise ALL the theological and pastoral issues relating to this issue.

The Diocesan Pastoral Council invites you to read this Discussion Paper carefully and prayerfully and to gather, formally or informally in your parish and region, to discuss the issues it raises. This is an important issue for consideration. A decision to invite overseas priests into ministry in this Diocese, or not to invite them, has deep and far-reaching implications for the future life of the church in this Diocese.

Please use the **Pull-out Centerfold** and address the questions therein. Complete the Response Form and return the Centre-fold to the Diocesan Pastoral Council. All responses are to be returned by **1 May 2006**.

Intended Outcome

Once all responses are returned, members of the Diocesan Pastoral Council will carefully consider the responses and use these to discern whether or not a recommendation is made to Bishop Michael Malone to invite overseas priests into active ministry in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle.

Discussion Paper

Discussion Paper

WORKERS FOR THE HARVEST: OVERSEAS PRIESTS IN THE DIOCESE OF MAITLAND-NEWCASTLE

During the 10 Regional Assemblies (2003-2004), a number of people raised the question of inviting overseas priests to minister in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle. In response to this, it was determined that further discussion was needed on this topic. Issuing an invitation to priests from overseas to minister among us was seen as one means of addressing what is clearly evident – a shortage in the number of locally-born priests to adequately cover the pastoral needs of the people of the Diocese. Such an invitation is not a simple undertaking, and not something to be undertaken lightly. There are a number of issues that need to be raised, discussed and addressed at all levels of the Diocese before an invitation is extended to overseas priests to come into the Diocese.

The purpose of this paper, which was commissioned as a result of Recommendation 5.3, is to raise some of the issues, theological and practical, associated with the possibility of the Diocese issuing an invitation to priests from overseas to minister among us. It is hoped that in raising these issues, they can be discussed openly and frankly so that the Diocese can be aware of the road on which it seeks to embark.

Background Information

In order that we may fully comprehend the state of play in terms of ordained ministry in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, it is appropriate at this point to briefly survey some statistical information. At the time of writing (July 2005) the Diocese is ministered to by 36 priests, three permanent deacons, and has five men in various stages of formation for ordination as priest or deacon (two and three respectively). The average age of the active clergy is 59.47 years, and in the next ten years (from 2005 to 2015) it can be reasonably expected that 19 of them will retire. There are also 16 retired priests residing in the Diocese. The Diocese is also served by four religious congregations with a total of seven priests involved in a number of various ministries.

In terms of the number of distinctive communities, the Diocese currently has 45 canonically established parishes. Because of the shortage of active clergy, 19 of these 45 parishes do not currently have a resident Parish Priest. In addition there are eight former canonical parishes that have been suppressed in the last two years through formal amalgamation or merger with their territory now forming part of the 45 current parishes. It can reasonably be expected that there will be more amalgamations or mergers of parishes in the future.



The purpose of this paper, which was commissioned as a result of Recommendation 5.3, is to raise some of the issues, theological and practical, associated with the possibility of the Diocese issuing an invitation to priests from overseas to minister among us.

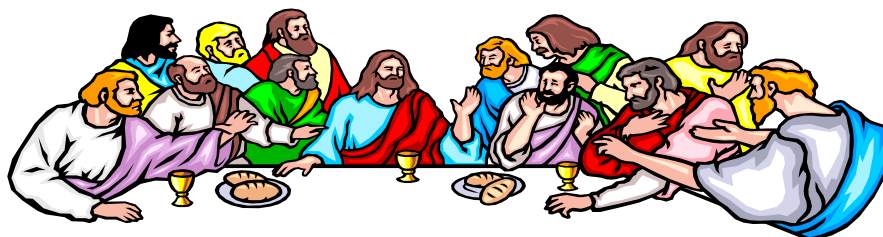
Discussion Paper

THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

As we have already mentioned, there are a number of theological perspectives to the question of inviting overseas-born priests to minister within the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle. There are three issues in particular that will be addressed in this paper, namely 1) our understanding of the place of Eucharist in the Church, 2) our understanding of Church, and 3) our understanding of diocesan priesthood. These three issues do not exhaust the theological perspectives associated with inviting overseas-born priests into the Diocese, and no doubt others may suggest many other significant issues. It is felt however that the three issues identified above are central to a proper theological debate surrounding the question being considered, and so we turn our attention to these.

The Place of Eucharist in the Church

Fundamental to the Church's identity is its Eucharistic nature. The Eucharist is "the source and summit of the Christian life" (*Lumen Gentium*, 11). The Eucharist, given to the Church by Christ, is "a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a Paschal banquet 'in which Christ is consumed, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us'" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 47). Through celebrating Eucharist together the Church is drawn ever more deeply into the divine life, and bound more closely together into the People of God. It is through the Eucharist that the Church is kept in being. All our actions as Church flow from the Eucharist, and all our actions as Church lead us back to the Eucharist in a never ending cycle of receiving and giving. In the words of St Irenaeus: "Our way of thinking is attuned to the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn confirms our way of thinking".



Given its centrality to the life of the Church, separation from the Eucharist is not to be accepted lightly. It is to the spiritual well-being of the People of God that they gather each Sunday (at least) to hear the Word of God proclaimed, to pray for the world, to give thanks to God (the Eucharistic Prayer), and to be nourished by receiving the Body and Blood of Christ before being sent back into the world to minister and to witness to the presence of Christ. But in order to celebrate Eucharist within the Catholic tradition of Christianity the presence of an ordained priest is necessary, because it is only when the People of God are gathered together with their ordained priest that the Eucharist can truly be celebrated. The inability of portions of the People of God to do this is not the ideal, to say the least.

When the alienation of portions of the People of God from the Eucharist becomes a chronic, ongoing reality, steps must be taken to ensure that the situation is remedied as quickly and as practicably as possible. The responsibility for this lies primarily in the hands of the Bishop, although not exclusively so as the entire People of God within the Diocese have a responsibility to do all that they can to assist. Ideally, as we shall see below, the ordained priests needed to redress this situation would be found in and called from the Diocese itself. This however is not always possible – and this is something that we will return to later in this paper. When priests can not be found from within the Diocese, then we must face the possibility of turning our attention to look outside the Diocese. But this has implications for the way in which we see and understand ourselves as Church.

Discussion Paper

How Do We Understand Church

The understanding of Church was radically reshaped as a result of the Second Vatican Council. Our understanding shifted from a focus on the Universal Church to a greater emphasis being given to the Particular or local Church. Gone was the understanding of the diocese as merely an administrative region of the “perfect society” of the Universal Church, and brought to the fore was the Particular Church, “in which and from which the one and only catholic Church exists” (*Lumen Gentium*, 23; *Code of Canon Law*, can. 368). Each Particular Church makes manifest the Universal Church, and through their communion constitute the Universal Church. It should be noted that in using the term ‘Particular Churches’ we are understood to be referring to dioceses and their equivalents.

How then do the People of God of the Diocese or Particular Church of Maitland-Newcastle understand themselves as Church? Do they see the Diocese as the local manifestation of the Church Universal, as the People of God led by the Bishop together with his presbyterate, and possessing the fullness of the reality that is the Church of Jesus Christ? Or is the Diocese the local branch office of the Church that is shepherded by the Bishop of Rome, with the local Bishop merely the branch manager? How we see ourselves in terms of Church will impact on if and why we might consider inviting priests from overseas to minister among us.

In the latter image, that of the Diocese as the local branch office, the possibility of inviting overseas priests to minister and work in the Diocese is not an issue that provokes much in the way of theological difficulty. In such an understanding of Church the problem is merely an administrative one. If one branch is short of needed personnel they simply ‘borrow’ them from another that has a surplus of personnel. The task in managing the number of ordained ministers is simply a numbers game – we need, we take – rather than the more complicated undertaking of fostering and nurturing vocations to the ordained ministry from within the branch. In such an understanding of Church, local autonomy, both of our Diocese and of any other diocese, is subjugated to ensuring that the needs of the Church Universal are met.

In the image of the Diocese as a Particular Church, the issue of inviting priests from overseas to minister here becomes slightly more complex. In such an understanding it could be argued that the Diocese is responsible for nurturing vocations to the ordained ministry so as to ensure that its needs in this area are met. A shortage of ordained ministers can not simply be handled by transferring personnel from another Diocese, since this does not take into account the understanding of the donating Diocese as itself being a Particular Church that manifests the fullness of the reality that is the Church of Jesus Christ. We must face the possibility that the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle is a church in need of evangelisation, an evangelisation that will require the assistance of another Particular Church or Churches. Recognition of a need for evangelisation is also recognition that in some way, the Diocese is in need of missionary activity from outside itself – and this has serious ramifications for how we understand the role of overseas priests within the diocese.

An acceptance of a need to be evangelised again via missionaries from outside the Diocese necessarily places limits on the role of overseas priests working within the Diocese. They are not to be considered a mere salve for our deficiencies in terms of the numbers of ordained ministers, but rather a force for change, a catalyst for a renewal and reinvigoration of the Diocese so that we can eventually return to a point where we are able to nurture and foster an abundance of vocations to ordained ministry. Ideally, priests from overseas would be ministering to us in such a way as to eventually not be needed. Their time in our Diocese would not be a long term engagement, but rather a short to medium term project while we revitalise our Diocese and our parishes, since it is only from this renewed vitality that vocations to ordained ministry will flow.

(This Discussion Paper is continued on Page 9.)

Discussion Paper



Workers for the Harvest: Overseas priests in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle

Discussion Questions and Response Form

Responding to the Discussion Paper

The Diocesan Pastoral Council invites you to read this Discussion Paper carefully and prayerfully and to gather, formally or informally in your parish and region, to discuss the issues it raises. This is an important issue for consideration. A decision to invite priests from overseas into ministry in this Diocese, or not to invite them, has deep and far-reaching implications for the future life of the church in this Diocese.

* Please use this **Pull-out Centerfold** to respond to this Discussion Paper.

* Complete your *Group or Personal Response Details*.

We require this information to authenticate all responses and to accurately analyse the data. All details will remain confidential and will not be used for any other purpose.

* Address the questions in this Response Form

Write your responses in the space provided and attach extra pages as required.

* Return the *Centre-fold* to the Diocesan Pastoral Support Unit.

This can be done by Mail, Email or Fax. See details on the back of this Form.

* All responses are to be returned by **1 May 2006**.

Workers for the Harvest:

Overseas priests in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle Group or Personal Response Details

Is this a GROUP or INDIVIDUAL response? GROUP INDIVIDUAL

Name of GROUP or INDIVIDUAL

Parish Name and Suburb or Town

What is your ROLE, FUNCTION or POSITION in the Church?

.....

As a Group or Individual, indicate your attendance at Mass. (please circle)

More than Once a Week Weekly More than Once a Month Occasionally

Circle your relevant age range: 0-20 21-40 41-60 60+.

Questions for prayerful consideration and comment after reading this Discussion Paper

(1) What would be the **positive dimensions** of inviting overseas priests into active ministry in the Diocese?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Discussion Paper

How Do We Understand Diocesan Priesthood

One of the most significant features of diocesan priests over and against priests from within a religious congregation of whatever form is that diocesan priests generally have some connection with the diocese in which they serve, either from being born there or from having chosen to offer themselves for service there. Religious priests on the other hand generally choose the religious congregation to which they commit themselves for a variety of other reasons, such as some sense of resonance with the particular charism of the congregation or with the particular apostolates in which the congregations work. This intrinsic connection with a particular diocese is fundamental to the identity of the diocesan priest, and it is this connection – or relationship – that needs to be considered when discussing the possibility of inviting priests from overseas to live and minister among us.

How will the people of the diocese relate to overseas priests who are sent to minister to them? Will parishes that are ministered to by overseas priests feel like the 'poor cousins' of those who don't? How, for that matter, will overseas priests relate to the people to whom they are sent? Will they feel welcomed into a community striving to live the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to become more Christ-like? Or will they feel alone and isolated in a foreign land, living among people who see them only as strangers? Underestimating the power and strength of the relationship between a community and their priests is all too easy when attempting to address a shortage in the number of priests. Will the introduction of priests from overseas into the Diocese set up within the minds of the people of the Diocese an 'us and them' distinction between locally born priests, and those who have been invited to help us revitalise our Diocese? If so, then we are doing a disservice to those whom we have invited, and who have responded graciously and at some personal cost.

Inviting priests from overseas into the diocese requires that we – bishop, priests, deacons, religious, lay – do all that is within our ability to embrace these newcomers, to welcome them warmly into our homes and hearths, and take the time to get to know who they are and what they have to offer to us. It is also incumbent upon us to allow them to get to know us and to discover what we might have to offer them in return. This is at the very heart of relationship, and relationship is at the very heart of our understanding of diocesan priesthood. A failure to do this will reduce our foreign-born guests to 'hired hands', mercenaries if you will, fit only to serve our needs and fulfil our wants.

A QUESTION OF JUSTICE

There is of course a very significant question of justice to be considered when determining whether the Diocese ought to issue an invitation to overseas priests to come to the Diocese and live and work amongst us. When considering what we are doing, we must make sure that we are doing it with pure hearts and intentions, and not for some selfish, self-centred concern for our own state of existence. Specifically, we need to ensure that we are not embarking on a course of action that might be described as 'ecclesiological imperialism', in which we seek to ensure that the needs of our Diocese are met at the expense of a Diocese from another region of the world that may be described as 'resource rich' in this regard. If we merely seek to ensure our long-term need for priests is met through harvesting an excess in numbers in another part of the world, then we have fundamentally lost our way as Church.

To invite priests from overseas into our Diocese as a means of revitalising us with the right intentions still does not negate our responsibility to ensure that the 'transaction' is a fair and equitable one. We can not invite priests into our Diocese as missionaries to assist us to revitalise and reinvigorate our life, and not give something in return. Should the invitation be extended, we must, as a matter of justice, ensure that those who come will be treated fairly, given the opportunity to gain from the experience themselves, and be able to take something with them when they leave our Diocese to return to their Diocese of origin. This must be considered a fundamental obligation of our Diocese if we are to embark along the road being considered.

Discussion Paper

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As could be imagined there are a large number of practical issues that need to be considered when considering the possibility of inviting overseas-born priests into the Diocese. These range from selecting appropriate candidates to more mundane issues of ensuring that the candidates can drive and are aware of domestic arrangements that apply here in Australia. Many of these issues are canvassed in a paper entitled “*Some Issues to Consider when Welcoming Priests Coming from Overseas*”, which was prepared by the National Commission for Clergy Life and Ministry, and is currently before the Australian Catholic Bishop’s Conference for approval and ratification. This Paper is a valuable resource that could be read in conjunction with this discussion paper. If it becomes available before 20 January 2006, we will facilitate its distribution for consideration.



Consultation

Before embarking on the journey, there must be a significant and wide-reaching consultation within the Diocese to ascertain the appropriateness or otherwise of the action. Furthermore there must be a significant catechesis around the implications of what is being undertaken to ensure that the people of the Diocese are fully aware of all such implications. If – and only if – there is a consensus amongst the people of the Diocese in favour of the endeavour can the Diocese, through the Bishop, begin the task of finding and engaging overseas priests to live and minister amongst us.

Along with the consultation there is a need to develop a long-term plan within the Diocese to make the most of the presence of overseas priests among us. It must always be remembered that the presence of priests from overseas is not the ideal, but rather a means by which the Diocese seeks to revitalise and re-evangelise itself. Part of the project calls for the plan to cover all aspects of how we can revitalise our worshipping communities, and thereby encourage and nurture home grown vocations to the diocesan priesthood. The project has two distinct components, and this too must be remembered. If we fail to take the long-term view of what we are undertaking then we will have again missed an opportunity to revitalise our Diocese.

Sourcing

After the consultation within the Diocese, and assuming that there is a consensus in favour of the project, the project moves into a very significant and critical stage. Where do we find priests to invite into the Diocese? How do we select them? Here we have a chance to address the fundamental question of relationship between priest and people that we mentioned above. Rather than seeking to find individual priests to invite into the Diocese, might it not be more beneficial in the long run – both in terms of ensuring we have enough to fulfil our needs, and in terms of ensuring a just and equitable treatment – to form a relationship with another diocese or dioceses who currently have abundant numbers of diocesan priests, and who might be willing to enter into an arrangement to supply a specified number of their priests for service in our diocese. Such a relationship would ensure a consistency in arrangements, would allow us to undertake the task proposed in a fair and equitable situation, and

Discussion Paper

permit our Diocese to make a contribution to the wider Church while ourselves being the beneficiary of ministry from the wider Church.



Such an arrangement could be constructed in such a way as to permit priests from the donor diocese to minister to us for a set period of time (perhaps a period of five years) before returning and being replaced by another priest. Such an arrangement would provide the opportunity for priests from the donor diocese to take advantage of opportunities here in Australia that they may not have in their home country – such as further education, cultural activities, etc – and thereby gain something which they can take back with them. It might even be possible for our Diocese to fund or facilitate such opportunities. This would assist the Diocese to undertake the project with some degree of honour and integrity, and avoid the ecclesiological imperialism that was identified above.

Inculturation & Orientation

The overseas priest invited into the Diocese will be faced with a culture or cultures that may be completely alien to him – or at the very least, a culture not his native one. By the same token, the people of the Diocese will be faced with a priest who was born, raised and formed for priesthood in a completely different culture. The potential for a clash of cultures, with its potentially cataclysmic fallout, is ever present in such a situation. This can be avoided however by a process of inculturation – which would involve exposure to all the elements of a different culture – but a process that is necessarily a two-way undertaking. The Diocese has an incumbent responsibility to ensure that such a process is possible, and put into place the necessary awareness/immersion programs for both the incoming overseas priest and the communities to which he will be sent.

Similarly, it is not possible for a priest from overseas to simply arrive in Australia one day and commence pastoral ministry the next. There must be a time for adjustment and orientation. There must be a time for attending to a whole range of practicalities – such as learning to drive, opening bank accounts, attending to any government requirements, etc – that are necessary. There is also a need for the incoming priest to be introduced to, and get to know, how the Diocese works, its history, and its people. Accordingly, it is the responsibility of the Diocese to construct a suitable orientation program that each incoming priest can undertake before being required to undertake pastoral duties in a parish of the Diocese.

The task involved in both inculturation and orientation are not something that can be achieved in a short period of time. An appropriate period of time for such an undertaking might be in the realm of six to twelve months – a period which might be seen as wasted time initially, but which is thought to be necessary to ensure a smooth transition from one country to another, from one diocese to another, from one culture to another. It would be necessary for the Diocese to provide the necessary resources – accommodation, finance, opportunities, etc – to facilitate such a process for each and every cohort of new arriving overseas priests. Such a program is not an optional component of the project, but an integral and vital component of the undertaking.

Discussion Paper

Deployment

When and if, priests from overseas begin to arrive in the Diocese, and have engaged in a proper inculturation and orientation program, and are ready to engage in pastoral duties, careful consideration must be given to how and where our guests are deployed. Do we simply deploy them to those parishes that don't have resident parish priests? Or is their deployment to be considered with a larger picture in mind? The answer to these questions is not a simple one, and again there is an element of justice to be considered here.

What we are seeking to achieve from the exercise? In the long-term, our overseas-born priests working in the Diocese are going to become redundant – once the other component of the project involving the revitalisation and renewal of the Diocese has been achieved, and vocations from within the Diocese are once again flourishing. It would be an injustice to place our overseas priests into positions of responsibility and governance, particularly if they are going to be present in the Diocese for a relatively short period of time. Further, placing them in such positions would be to inhibit their ability to properly gain from their experience in Australia.

How then do we deploy our guests? Perhaps the most useful situation is to deploy them as assistant priests within the Diocese, either to a specific parish or to a group of parishes (or a region), to assist the local-born priests in carrying out pastoral duties, and to be a force for renewal and revitalisation therein. Such a mode of deployment gives the appropriate recognition to both our locally-born priests and our overseas guests, and recognition to the proper aims of the project. Such a deployment also recognises the limitations of the overseas priests that are inherent to the project.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

It was mentioned at the beginning of this paper that its purpose was to raise some of the issues surrounding the inviting of overseas priests to live and minister within the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle. It was further mentioned that it was hoped that in doing so the issues could be discussed openly and frankly in the hope of raising awareness of the significance of such an undertaking. This then is the next step – for the issue to be discussed at all levels of the Diocese, by pastoral councils, by parishes in general, by agencies, and by any other interested groups in the Diocese. From these discussions it is hoped that individuals and groups will use the Question and Response Form to submit their responses for consideration by the Diocesan Pastoral Council. The Diocesan Pastoral Council will discern whether or not a recommendation is made to the Bishop to invite overseas priests into active ministry in this Diocese.

Prepared by Andrew Doohan.



Diocesan Pastoral Support Unit
Diocese of Maitland Newcastle
PO Box 756 NEWCASTLE NSW 2300
ph (02) 4979 1150 fax: (02) 4979 1159
email: dpsu@mn.catholic.org.au
www.mn.catholic.org.au