

In the Heartland
Called to be Catholic / Catholic

By Bishop Richard Pates
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Recently, Archbishop Charles Palmer-Buckle visited the Diocese of Des Moines for a week. He serves as the Archbishop of Accra, Ghana. I had the good fortune to visit him last summer in Accra which is the capitol of Ghana.

The purpose of the Archbishop's coming to the Midwest – namely, Iowa was to visit and support two priests from his archdiocese who are on assignment in our diocese. One is Father Raphael Assamah who is pastor at St. Mary in Shenandoah and St. Mary in Hamburg. The other is Father James Ahenkora, pastor of St. John in Greenfield and St. Patrick in Massena.

Both of them are about 5'7" sturdily built and full of energy. Their smiles are infectious, their spirit is positive. Their English is equivalent to that of the Queen of England. They are particularly effective musicians – having cut several CDs. They use their musical skills effectively with teens and pre-teens.

Fathers Raphael and James draw raves from all quarters. The people they serve are attached to them. When I installed one of them after a few months into his ministry, a middle-aged woman parishioner stopped as she was leaving church. She forcibly put her finger into my chest several times, exclaiming, "Don't you even dare think of moving this priest!"

Our brother American priests have commented to me on several occasions how impressed they are by these two priests with their energy and pastoral dedication. They observe one cannot help but absorb some of the spirit emanating from these two men.

In a couple of conversations which the Archbishop and I had we mused about an emerging Church which might have more expansive borders and being more flexible with the distribution of priests throughout the world.

In many African dioceses, there is an explosion of priestly vocations. This summer in the Diocese of Konongo – Mampong, I was privileged to ordain 15 young priests. The diocese, under the continuing leadership of its first bishop, Joseph Osei-Bonsu, is 22 years old, has 116 priests including the newly ordained, 53 parishes and no priests yet retired. Bishop Osei-Bonsu is most generous in sharing his priests. Currently, six priests from Konongo - Mampong serve in the Diocese of Des Moines.

Archbishop Palmer-Buckle's point is that vocations are booming to such an extent that they do not have the teaching faculties or physical facilities sufficient enough to formally educate those seeking to respond to a priestly vocation. On the other hand, especially in Western Europe, Canada, the United States and Australia there are many seminaries operating at far below their capacity. Why not enable the potential seminarians from Africa to be formed in the Western/Australian seminaries for possible service in those countries? After all didn't the apostles scatter when called to exercise ministry following Pentecost?

Another experience highlighted this possibility. I was privileged to ordain four priests from the Divine Word Community (SVD) in Techny, Illinois this spring. Their countries of origin: Togo, Vietnam and China. Their countries of assignment: Chad, United States and Mozambique.

The leadership of the Divine Word Fathers categorize themselves as “Catholic – Catholic.” Their membership comes from throughout the world. Once ordained and certified for ministry, the priests and brothers can be assigned anywhere. Hence, they are truly “Universal-Universal.” I was highly impressed by the four I ordained. All were highly competent, had admirable poise in their public ministry but very engaging, humble and enjoyable on a personal level.

As one reflects upon the idea of Archbishop Palmer-Buckle, such an approach may be an attempt to some degree to break down the walls of tribalism, nationalism, racism, sexism, the rich-poor divide. It is evident in America that we need to do something to address the division and potential violence caused by the resistance of responding to the needs of the refugees and immigrants who are fleeing intolerable conditions. More emphasis needs to be placed in assisting and resolving the problems of violence, poor education, and corruption in their home countries. These problems are to a great degree rooted in the American and European insatiable appetites for drugs. With Pope Francis we need to prioritize the grounding principle: We are all God’s children.

In response to Archbishop Palmer-Buckle’s proposal, some will say it’s way out. It’s unrealistic. Others would contend, it’s about time. Whatever be the case, we embrace the future with confidence. The Holy Spirit is in charge.