

Latin America
Parish Diary
Fr. Peter Daly
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Fr. Peter Daly sees permanent deacons as a possible ministry solution in Latin America.

Pope Benedict was recently in Mexico and Cuba. That is a good thing. Both countries are extremely troubled. The Catholic Church there needs a visit from its supreme pastor to encourage it.

I've never been to Cuba, but I have been frequently to Mexico and Nicaragua over the last 12 years. We have sister parishes in both countries. We have visited them and the pastors of those parishes have visited us in the U.S.A.

Every country has its own particular situation, but there are some similar problems. The Catholic Church everywhere, north and south, has been lazy. We have rested on the assumption that we are part of the culture. We think that people will learn the faith simply because they are part of a "Catholic Culture." But we cannot rely on the culture to do our job.

The Catholic Church in Mexico and Nicaragua is much like the rest of Latin America. Everywhere there is increasing secularism and the challenges of materialism, just as we have in the U.S. There is also increasing competition from Evangelical and Pentecostal church, often "imported" from the U.S.A.

People are leaving the Catholic Church in Latin America at the rate of thousands per day. In Puerto Rico and Brazil, there are now more practicing Protestants than Catholics. Every time I visit in Latin America I see more and more non-Catholic churches.

The Catholic Church in the various parts of the Americas has much that we could learn from one another. U.S. parishes could learn about joyful and enthusiastic celebration from Latin countries. The Latin Catholic community could learn about the ministry of permanent deacons from North America.

The Catholic Church everywhere needs more clergy. Permanent deacons are part of the answer. The Latin American church could imitate the U.S. in its adoption of the permanent diaconate.

In the U.S. we have one priest for every 1500 to 2000 Catholics depending on the area. But we have nearly 17,000 permanent deacons, just over 40% of the permanent deacons in the world.

In Latin America often have one priest for 10,000 Catholics or more. But in most of Latin America, they have absolutely no permanent deacons. I met the only permanent deacon in the whole country of Nicaragua at a funeral a few years ago. There should be one in every village in Latin America.

For many people in rural Mexico or Nicaragua, the church is just an empty building. Many towns have a chapel where mass is celebrated only once or twice a year. People are baptized as babies but then spiritually abandoned by the clergy. As a result they become Evangelicals or Pentecostals, when a local preacher shows up in town. What else could we expect?

But if they had a permanent deacon, it would be better. He could be a married man from the village. He could be trained to preach the word, pray with the sick, officiate at weddings and bury the dead. He could know his people who would be his neighbors. Our sister parish in

central Mexico has more than 20 chapels in outlying towns. The priest visits rarely. Every chapel could have a permanent deacon who could celebrate a liturgy of the word on Sunday, preach a homily, and distribute the Eucharist consecrated earlier at the parish church.

We cannot reasonably expect people, to walk 10 or 20 miles one way to mass. This is especially true when they have an evangelical church nearby that is inviting them to worship.

Jesus the good shepherd would go in search of the sheep, not expect them to come to Him.