

U.S. mission priests want church updates

WASHINGTON - Priests serving in U.S. mission dioceses say they could benefit most from updates on Catholic thinking and practice - but keep it short, please, they said. The desire for information and resources was one of the findings of a survey conducted on behalf of the Chicago-based Catholic Church Extension Society and the National Institute for the Renewal of the Priesthood at the Washington Theological Union. The survey findings were made public in early September.

Priests responding to the survey said they would also benefit from information on such multicultural issues as Hispanic ministry, immigration, inculturation, multiculturalism and working with diverse cultures. They added they would also like to know more about evangelization, catechesis, ministry to nonpracticing Catholics, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and liturgy.

"Most of these pastors are isolated from brother priests, and unless they are reading church magazines, books or are following the daily religious news on the pulse of the church and innovations it is generating, they risk becoming status-quo priests who lack the energy and creativity of new ideas related to their ministry," said a summary by Father Eugene Hemrick, who conducted the survey.

Brevity, though, was a theme running throughout individual priests' responses:

- "Given the shortage of priests in this diocese and such limited time, concise communication would be most beneficial."
- "Provide materials that we can insert into church bulletins that would be interesting, brief."
- "There's not a great deal of time available to us. We are a highly stressed-out group."
- "Neither do I have time to spend much time on the computer. Most priests in missionary territory do a lot of driving. I find a lot of my ongoing education to be through recorded conferences. I can listen while I drive."
- "Keep it brief. I pastor four churches that cover a 1,000-square-mile area. I am busy."
- "Priests are already tremendously overworked. Whatever you do, offer it in a 'short and sweet' version."

- “K.I.S.S. - ‘Keep it simple, stupid’ - is always good advice.”

In all, 370 priests from 64 missionary dioceses took part in the survey, conducted in April. Nearly two-thirds speak a second language, most frequently Spanish. The median age of the respondents was 57, although one was 30 years old and another 98.

The survey listed other areas in which priests said they’d like more resources.

A second level of interest included homily aids, youth ministry, leadership and staff development skills, stewardship, spirituality resources and how-to materials on ministry in rural and mission settings.

Ranked below those were ecumenism, biblical resources, networking methods, how-to information on working in poor and impoverished areas, vocations, staffing hints - especially for priestless parishes - and help in dealing with finances.

Asked what books they had read recently, 22 of the respondents named Oblate Father Ronald Rolheiser’s “The Holy Longing.” Pope Benedict XVI’s “Jesus of Nazareth” garnered 10 mentions. Three books, the pope’s “Sacrament of Charity,” Father Rolheiser’s “The Restless Heart” and Benedictine Father Thomas Acklin’s “The Unchanging Heart of the Priesthood,” were mentioned five times.

Asked what Web sites the priests visited, the most frequently cited were those of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Vatican, the Archdiocese of St. Louis and Creighton University in Omaha, Neb.

Of those surveyed, 16 percent said they had participated in an Internet discussion and of those 83 percent said they found it at least somewhat helpful.

The survey issued a cautionary note to Web-site builders that priests in mission areas tend to have access only to dial-up Internet services, making Web sites that feature lots of graphics on their home page difficult to access.