

# Frontier Fortitude

## CRL Ministers to Rural Priests

By Father Jim Schmitmeyer



**I**f you drive to Sunday Mass in Cactus, Texas, you will likely pass a mosque on the way to church. The employment needs of a meat-packing plant make this town of 3,000 residents more culturally diverse than many big cities. What some folks deride as “flyover country” is actually a new frontier, a wondrous region bursting with heartfelt goodwill and compassion.

This dimension of rural America pulses at the heart of Catholic Rural Life’s Thriving in Rural Ministry. The retreats take place numerous times each year throughout the country, providing rural pastors with an opportunity to reflect on the nature and importance of rural ministry.

### New neighbors

When refugees from Guatemala arrived in Cactus, Father Hugo Andrade, pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, quickly obtained Mass books in Quiché, the newcomers’ native language. Inspired by the fervor of the Guatemalans’ Catholic faith, his parishioners soon acquired a statue of “El Señor de Esquipulas,” a popular devotional image in Guatemala.

Such is the nature of many of the stories recounted during the Thriving in Rural Ministry retreats. At each gathering, participants share and discuss the many ways in which small-town parishes go about constructing the Kingdom of God in the heart of the heartland. Having participated as a presenter at many of the retreats, my overall assessment is positive and consistent: folks who reside in the overlooked regions of our country do not overlook the needs of their neighbors.

Through the leadership of dedicated shepherds, rural parishes lend assistance in a wide variety of situations and circumstances, from volunteering at local pregnancy centers to supporting the work of addiction recovery workers to ministering to those incarcerated at state penitentiaries and the list goes on! Clearly, the pastoral work unfolding on the rural frontier is a beacon of hope for our nation.

### Wildfires and wide-open arms

During a Thriving in Rural Ministry retreat held



at Mt. Angel Abbey in Oregon, Father Vijay Mareedu, a priest of the Fort Worth Diocese, described his community's efforts to marshal food and provide lodging for families who lost homes in a wildfire that destroyed a significant portion of their town.

Listening to Father Mareedu, a native of India, relate how Anglo and Hispanic families united as one in the face of a devastating loss filled each participant on the retreat with admiration for their brother priest and confirmation of the importance of the calling they share.

### Harvesting and fishing

In addition to in-depth presentations on integral ecology, pastoral theology, and leadership strategies, each Thriving in Rural Ministry retreat explores how rural communities foster strong connections between pastoral ministers and their people. These associations include relationships that develop from supporting local businesses and assisting community organizations, as well as from displaying local pride by cheering on the hometown team on a Friday night.

At one of the retreats, a pastor from Minnesota described the appreciation from farmers in his parish when he adjusted Mass schedules during harvest season. A young priest from a Florida suburb shared his delight in learning to fish the bayous of Louisiana. A Kansas pastor, raised in rural Mexico, discovered common ground with descendants of Czech immigrants while helping them butcher hogs!

At each Thriving in Rural Min-

istry retreat, the endearment between rural pastors and their people becomes brightly apparent and joyfully celebrated.

### Love unto death

In some cases, the bonds between country pastors and their local communities yield insights into issues of a global nature.

During one of the retreats, Father Nicodemus Shaghel spoke of the violence in his native Nigeria. With agony in his voice, he related the number of priests kidnapped and killed in his home diocese and the danger that he faced while serving the church in the rural regions of his country.

At the Eucharist offered later that day, Father Shaghel's witness to the power of the cross reverberated throughout the petitions and prayers of the sacred liturgy.

### Lives of fulfillment

A 2022 study put out by The Catholic Project, an initiative of The Catholic University of America, found that 77% of priests could be described as "flourishing." However, 45% of priests said they have experienced at least one symptom of burnout, with priests under 45 more likely to experience it.

A recent book by Monsignor Steve Rosetti, "Priesthood in a Time of Crisis," sheds light on some of the reasons why priests find contentment in their vocation. It also looks at the "crisis" happening in contemporary America, where family breakdown, substance abuse, and deaths by despair are on the rise.

In light of this reality, those

who live and work in rural communities are in a unique position to offer insight into the healing properties of neighborly outreach and compassion. The deep structures of rural living—from love of the earth to love of one another—is a sure and time-tested remedy for the times in which we live.

### Bonds of affection

According to Monsignor Rosetti's research, a key factor that contributes to a priest's sense of meaning and fulfillment is the level of interaction with the people whom he serves. Although the studies cited in his book do not delineate between rural, urban, or suburban communities, those who are familiar with rural life know that small communities rely on a spirit of harmony to maintain their existence.

The positive aspects of rural life, however, do not negate the practical challenges that accompany rural ministry, such as long distances between parishes, the lack of contact with fellow priests, or the lack of social services in rural counties. Fortunately, retreats such as Thriving in Rural Ministry—along with ongoing follow-up meetings via the Internet—help address these issues. In addition to this excellent program, the ongoing encouragement of CRL continues to provide hope and encouragement to its local chapters and countless individuals across the country.

May the virtuous example of all those who live and work on "the new frontier" continue to invigorate the life of the church and promote a unifying vision for our nation.