

# International priests get coached in Canadian ways through enculturation program

This winter, Rev. Moses Savarimuthu is ready.

It's been just over a year since Father Savarimuthu experienced an Alberta winter for the first time. He traded life in the tropical city of Trichy, India – his hometown – for his first assignment in Canada, as co-pastor of Our Lady of Angels Parish.

"When I was in Fort Saskatchewan I was driving out to Lamont, Redwater, and the surrounding communities, sometimes in heavy snow. At first I thought I would drive into the ditch," recalls Savarimuthu, who has since been reassigned to Blessed Sacrament Parish in Wainwright. "Sometimes ice had formed on the road, so when I was driving I was really frightened."

Savarimuthu noted some big differences in Church life too. In India there's a 10-day celebration at each parish on their patron saint's feast day; preparation for First Holy Communion and Confirmation takes weeks, not days; and the church is teeming with kids.



**Andrew Ehrkamp/Grandin Media Gary Gagnon, aboriginal relations coordinator for the Archdiocese of Edmonton, teaches priests about First Nations**

In Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rev. Jean-Claude Ndanga was accustomed to parishioners dancing in his church during the Mass – which might raise eyebrows here in Canada.

To say there can be a bit of culture shock inside and outside of parish life for foreign priests is an understatement. However, the impact is eased a little by their participation in an Enculturation Program offered through Newman Theological College to international priests who serve across Western Canada. It's roughly four weeks of classroom and practical instruction on topics ranging from Canadian and First Nations culture and Church history to how to enunciate when preaching in English.

Each year, 20 to 25 priests participate in the program, which began in 2004 through the work of Rev. Jack Gallagher, who was president of Newman at the time, and Alice Colak, who was in charge of immigration and settlement with

Catholic Social Services.



### Rev. Robert Gauthier

Since then, 17 dioceses in Western Canada have sent priests to Edmonton for Enculturation. More than 235 priests from 22 countries have taken the program.

“Catholic churches give birth to vocations, but not enough,” says Rev. Robert Gauthier, co-director of the program. “So they need to rely on foreign priests, who come here for three, four, five years.

“The program is to facilitate the transition before being launched into their parishes. You have to have an awareness of the society that you are working in.”

Even though all priests share a similar theological background, there is a steep learning curve. The Enculturation program teaches about Canadian culture, Church history, and liturgical practices as well as social topics such as appropriate personal space and behaviour in a pastor that might turn Canadians off. Some of the students also gain a greater appreciation for human rights.



### Rev. Jean-Claude Ndanga

“Freedom is not always respected,” said Father Ndanga, the new associate pastor at Our Lady of Angels Parish who arrived from Congo in September. “The respect of human rights is not always observed, but I see I can learn more from Canadian people. Many questions were coming into my mind about what was going to happen there. It was very, very helpful for me, because I realized that I needed to know more about Canadian people, especially its culture.”

Father Gauthier said each individual needs to adapt to the Canadian Church, just as Gauthier himself did when he was a young missionary navigating the ethnic tensions in Rwanda.

“The program doesn’t prevent you from making errors, but at least you have an awareness,” he said. “There is a red light that will come on in your mind, (asking) ‘Is this exactly how we do things?’

“We don’t want them to become Canadian. Enculturation is not a process of denying yourself. But you understand there’s part of your culture that needs adaptation to the new culture you’re serving in.”

In addition to classroom work at the Basilian House of Studies, priests visit Our Lady of Mercy Parish in Enoch to experience worship in an aboriginal

setting, and the Youville Seniors Home in St. Albert.

Speakers also address sensitive topics such as gender roles in Canada – which may be different in a priest's home country – as well as racism, transgender identification, and same-sex attraction.

If there are priests who are resistant to the Enculturation course, they are a minority, Father Gauthier said.

“At the beginning the first presenters are bishops, in order to show to these priests that this is important. You're here and you're not wasting your time. But on the whole, they come here motivated. They see the purpose. It's very concrete.”

Father Gauthier describes it as a learning process that works both ways. “The adaptation is not only in one direction. The adaptation is for the priest, but the community also has to adapt.”

To that end, a large part of the Enculturation Program is focused on enunciation. Priests spend more than seven three-hour sessions on accent clarity. Gauthier said it's much more important than people think, especially when preaching a homily.

“This is one of the major public challenges in their communication,” Gauthier explained. “We tell them ‘Your communication has to be clear.’ You could do a very substantial homily, very spiritual, but if we don't understand you, that's a major issue.”

Father Ndanga agrees. “The biggest challenge for me is to make myself understood and welcomed by people. I know I'm not a born English man. French is my mother language.”

A year after graduating from the Enculturation Program, Father Savarimuthu laughs, saying he's learned to keep his sermons short and to the point.

“Be brief. Be clear. Be seated! They want some jokes. It makes the priest more human.”

The Enculturation Program includes a visit to Our Lady of Mercy Parish in Enoch, to observe how Mass is celebrated by First Nations, and a learning session with Gary Gagnon, the aboriginal relations coordinator for the Archdiocese of Edmonton.

Father Gauthier says: “If you want to serve people from First Nations, if you don't know their background, you don't know their history and the challenges they are facing now, you could have a very good heart but it could be very difficult.”

Foreign priests face the additional challenge of isolation and homesickness, so they are paired with a mentor priest in the same diocese to share experiences and thoughts. Thousands of kilometres from home, the foreign priests keep in

contact with family and friends in their home country, and some of them, in fact, think about them a lot.

“It’s my country. I miss my family, my friends, my land and my culture,” Father Ndanga said, adding they have questions about life in Canada as he becomes more and more comfortable here.

“I’m feeling at home with Canadian culture. I have to make myself Canadian among Canadians. I came to work with people. I came to be one of them, to work with them.”

Father Savarimuthu admits he did get emotional last year when, as he was boarding a flight to Canada, his 86-year-old mother asked him to promise to return to officiate at her funeral.

Since then he has adapted to his new home. An avid athlete, Savarimuthu said he’s been able join in volleyball, soccer and other sports in his local parish – and he’s even watched his first hockey game at Rogers Place, although he hasn’t played the game himself yet.

Father Gauthier said he “can’t imagine” that a foreign priest who spends several years in Canada would not return to his home country as a changed man who will enrich his home country.

“The experience they will have here could change their mind, change their vision, and I don’t think they would be exactly the same priest.”

By the same token, local parishes in Canada won’t be the same either.

“The priests come with their ecclesial experience and their social and cultural experience, and I would say this exchange can enrich our Church,” Gauthier said.

“A positive sign with the coming of these priests is that ‘Catholic’ means universal. Canadian churches are multinational, so it’s good that we have priests from abroad. They bring not only their experience of Jesus Christ, but they also bring their sensitivity.”

Father Ndanga agrees, adding that he may be new to Canada but he brings a universal gift to his new home.

“What I bring from Congo is my experience of God.”