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**NEWS
RELEASE**

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Bishop Hying urges Wisconsin legislators to address visa program affecting foreign-born priests

MADISON – Bishop Donald J. Hying of Madison has called upon Wisconsin Senators and Representatives to address a visa program that threatens the ability of foreign-born priests in the Diocese of Madison to carry out their work.

The Religious Worker Visa Program (RWVP) was created to ensure that religious organizations in the United States have access to workers who can carry out their religious and charitable activities. But as of April 2023, the U.S. Department of State has implemented a change to its interpretation of the Immigration and Nationality Act, such that those applying for an employment-based, fourth preference immigrant visa (EB-4) are now facing increased wait times for their visas to become available.

“The change was made suddenly, without sufficient notice, and after the State Department operated under the prior interpretation for seven years—ample time to establish a detrimental reliance by individuals and their sponsors,” Bishop Hying wrote in his September 27, 2024 letter to Senators Baldwin and Johnson, and Representatives Steil, Pocan, Van Orden, Fitzgerald, and Grothman.

“Prior to the change, it took about one year for applicants from most countries to receive an EB-4 visa. Someone applying today will now wait 14 years or more for a visa to become available,” Bishop Hying continued. This also means that it is now impossible for a non-immigrant religious worker (R-1) visa holder to adjust status to an EB-4 visa within the maximum time of five years provided for an R-1 visa.

As a result of this change, many Catholic priests, religious brothers and sisters, and others cannot remain in their ministries for more than the five years of their R-1 visas; they would have to leave the United States for at least one year before possibly returning on another R-1 visa.

Bishop Hying expressed concern about the implications that this has for foreign-born priests in the Diocese of Madison.

“The R-1 visas of 12 of the 31 foreign-born priests in our diocese will expire in the next few years,” said Bishop Hying. “Foreign-born priests account for 30 percent of the total active priests ministering in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Madison, ...ministering in 63 percent of all parishes in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Madison.” He continued, “The Diocese of Madison has made a significant financial investment and time commitment to maintain its foreign-born priest program, including the costs related to the U.S. immigration process. Additional

financial investment will be necessary for each priest who is required to return to his native country for a year before returning to Madison.” He also said that the loss of stability that parishes would face with priests leaving for a year or more would be detrimental to the relationship between these priests and their parishioners.

Bishop Hying pointed to an interfaith letter from May 2023, led by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), that offered recommendations to address this problem, such as shortening the length of time that a religious worker is required to be outside the United States before returning on another R-1 visa. This change “would provide meaningful relief to organizations such as the Diocese of Madison, our workers, and the communities relying on them,” said Bishop Hying.

Bishop Hying closed his letter with words from Pope Francis while he addressed a joint meeting of Congress in 2015: “It is important that today, as in the past, the voice of faith continue to be heard, for it is a voice of fraternity and love, which tries to bring out the best in each person and in each society. Such cooperation is a powerful resource in the battle to eliminate new global forms of slavery, born of grave injustices which can be overcome only through new policies and new forms of social consensus.”

“To achieve this, a functioning Religious Worker Visa Program is necessary,” said Bishop Hying.

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