

Unexpected changes to visas could impact AR priests

written by Katie Zakrzewski |



Unexpected changes in the federal government's allocation of EB-4 visas could negatively impact six priests from other countries serving the Diocese of Little Rock.

Two types of visas are available to religious workers from the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services.

- The EB-4 (employment-based category 4) visa includes special immigrant religious workers. It allows qualified workers to stay in the U.S. on a permanent basis and potentially become U.S. citizens.
- The R-1 non-immigrant visa only allows religious workers to stay in the country for up to five years.

Concerns came about following the State Department's unexpected decision in March 2023 regarding the allocation of EB-4 visas. At that time, the EB-4 visa category, which includes religious workers, was flooded with additional applicants from Central and South American countries, predominantly unaccompanied minors and refugees.

This change lengthened the timeline for qualifying and receiving an EB-4 visa. Religious workers, like international priests, seeking to switch from the temporary R-1 visa to the

permanent EB-4 visa will have to leave the United States when their R-1 status expires, before they are eligible to apply for an EB-4 visa.

Deacon Matt Glover, chancellor for canonical affairs for the Diocese of Little Rock, told *Arkansas Catholic* that the immigration slow-down could impact the state.

“All of a sudden, those people also got dumped into this category of EB-4 visas for green cards, which dramatically increased the number of people then automatically who were seeking what was already a limited pool of available green card visas,” Glover said. “Every year there’s only a certain amount of visas within all of these different categories. And so for religious workers, there was already a backlog in processing. And then all of a sudden, kind of arbitrarily, the U.S. State Department decided that this other group had been miscategorized and really needed to be categorized this other way. And that impacted the priority dates that determine when someone is eligible to get their green card.”

The priority date for individuals seeking this type of visa — including priests from international dioceses — became backdated by several years. Once a religious worker’s priority date becomes current, they can file for the second step of the green card process, which is the I-485 and the I-765, which allows for employment authorization while waiting for the green card to be processed.

The Diocese of Little Rock has been dealing with this predicament since 2022 where several priests affected by the visa delays had to leave the country for a year. But the situation has worsened.

Unfortunately, for newer R-1 religious workers, the backlog is so long that they are unlikely to be able to apply for the second step of the green card process within the five-year period.

The Diocese of Little Rock isn’t the only diocese that will be affected by the change — nearly 90 percent of U.S. dioceses rely on international clergy.

In a lawsuit filed Aug. 16 against the State Department, the Department of Homeland Security and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, along with their directors, the Diocese of Paterson, N.J., said the unexpected change could lead to five priests “abandoning their congregations” when the visas expire.

The diocese alleged in the lawsuit that the federal government’s policy change is discriminatory against religious employers and favors nonreligious ones.

“The Patterson lawsuit, which I’ve reviewed, is a creative and interesting effort at trying to force some change,” Glover said. “... It’s anybody’s guess as to whether it’ll be successful. I hate to speculate on the likelihood of it succeeding, but I’m hopeful that it will succeed.”

If the lawsuit is unsuccessful, Glover said that in order to fix this issue in time, it would fall to internal administrative changes at the USCIS or Congress to increase the number of visas available within this category.

Glover said the shortage of priests resulting from immigration issues will put a strain on many parishes.

“And the problem then becomes — especially for guys that are pastors at the time that that five

years hits — because then that throws the administration of that parish into turmoil,” he said. “We have to find a different pastor or at least find a temporary pastor ... but it’s still really problematic, because a parish has gotten used to that particular priest... It takes a while, especially for guys that have never been to the United States before, for them to get acclimated and used to things and for the parishes to get used to them. And so by the time they get the ground underneath their feet, all of a sudden they’re having to leave after just five years.

“...It’ll be constant turnover in certain parishes. And we already have enough constant turnover just because of low vocations.”

Several priests in the diocese will be affected if the lawsuit is not successful, if the USCIS does not make internal changes or if Congress does not pass legislation.

Father Joel Ibebuike, a priest from the Diocese of Orlu in Nigeria and associate pastor at St. Peter the Fisherman in Mountain Home, began serving in Arkansas this year. His R-1 visa will run out in 2029, at which point he will have to leave the U.S. for one year before returning here on a new R-1.

He told *Arkansas Catholic* in an email that it should be easier for foreign citizens to immigrate to the United States, a process that he has seen become increasingly more challenging in recent years.

“Foreign citizens ought to be welcome in any country when there is a need for their presence to enhance the lives of the citizens of the host country,” he wrote. “The coming of such foreign citizens ought to be legal and seamless. An immigrant who comes to another country ought to be welcome and allowed to stay. The person ought to be allowed to render his or her services so long as the citizens need the services.”

Father Ibebuike said he is worried about increasing challenges for immigrants in the U.S. and is concerned about the “uncertainty of what tomorrow holds.”

“There is a genuine need for my services because of the insufficient number of priests ministering to the people of God in the Diocese of Little Rock,” he wrote. “More so, the people of God have expressly shown that the diversity I bring to the table positively impacts their faith and broadens their understanding of the universality of the Catholic Church. The immigration concern puts a lot of pressure on me in terms of having long-term planning. It affects my mental health.”



Father Martin Dara celebrates Mass at the Cathedral of St. Andrew in Little Rock Oct. 13. A priest from the Diocese of Nellore, India, he will be impacted by visa changes in 2029. (Courtesy Larry Taylor)

Father Martin Dara, associate pastor of the Cathedral of St. Andrew in Little Rock and a priest from the Diocese of Nellore, will also be impacted. He arrived in April, and his R-1 visa will run out in 2029 as well.

“Our bishop in the Diocese of Nellore in India gave us the opportunity to work here for 10 years ... but I still feel bad because ... we’ve learned a little bit of Spanish and we’ve learned how to drive here, and in a short amount of time, we found our home here,” he said. “This has become the place for me. I would be happy if I got to practice and experience these skills here for a long time, but I will obey the rules of the state and the Diocese of Little Rock.”

Father Raj Nalazala, administrator of St. Norbert Church in Marked Tree and associate pastor of Blessed Sacrament Church in Jonesboro, Father Paulin Raj Vatakali, associate pastor of St. Stephen Church in Bentonville, and Father Manikyaraju Kotha, associate pastor of Our Lady of the Ozarks Shrine in Winslow and St. Joseph Church in Fayetteville, are from the Diocese of Nellore and will also be impacted.

“All three of these priests came in 2023, meaning their five-year R-1 period will run out sometime in 2028, at which point they will have to leave the U.S. for one year before returning on a new R-1 — assuming there are no changes to the status quo,” Glover said.

“It makes me sad,” Father Nalazala said. “ ... I have to leave in 2028. ... That is my year of returning back to India, staying in India for one year, getting a new visa and coming back. I’m not at all happy regarding that situation.”



Father Kiran Ingilela celebrates Mass at St. Elizabeth Church in Oppelo Sept. 29. He began serving in the diocese April 8. (Courtesy Father Kiran Ingilela)

Father Kiran Ingilela, associate pastor of Sacred Heart Church in Morrilton and St. Elizabeth Church in Oppelo, also from the Diocese of Nellore, will also be affected. He arrived this year, so his R-1 time period will expire in 2029.

“Coming to Arkansas all the way from India, after living in my home country for 42 years, and serving there for 12 years in the priesthood ... is really a different perspective on life for us, learning about the people and culture and language,” he said. “And it takes time for us to get adjusted to this field of service here. There’s a lot of things to learn — learning about driving and living your own life here. It’s a very good thing, but it’s like receiving all of this training, and when you’re ready for employment, you’re asked to leave the country.”