

# A CALL TO SERVE

SPECIAL MISSIONS/VOCATIONS SUPPLEMENT TO THE CATHOLIC COURIER--OCTOBER 15, 1992



Father Edwin Metzger (third from the left) meets with members of the Carton City Buru Buru parish, a small Christian community in Nairobi. Courtesy of Father Edwin Metzger

## Missionary finds cultures have much to share

By Father Edwin Metzger  
Guest contributor

Only two "wanzunga" — people of European stock — live in Athi River, Kenya, this booming town of 25,000 Africans. We are Maryknoll Father Thomas Donnelly from Philadelphia and myself, Edwin Metzger, a Rochester diocesan priest.

About 50 Asians live here, including the three Catholic Philippine Lay Missioners at our parish: Nelly Abiog, Ming Bersuela, and Doy Castro. The other Asians are Hindus, Sikhs, and Moslems. Several Protestant churches and a mosque with a small congregation of Moslems are located here as well.

When I first came to Africa in January, 1989, I sensed a deep spirituality among the people that contrasted with the materialism and consumerism of the cities, towns, and villages of the Rochester diocese.

Now, however, after a few years, I question whether the spirituality of the people of our parish, St. Jude Catholic Church, Athi River is better, or deeper than that of the American parishes I know.

I am sure of this: life is different here. People look upon their church in ways different from many of the Catholics of Cayuga, Monroe, and Ontario counties I have served.

Our large church is filled for two Masses every Sunday, and a third is well attended mostly by high school students from the boarding school next door. But this is not unlike many parishes in my home diocese, especially in suburban Rochester.

Some people come very early, especially the children. Alas, many people come late, usually about the time the sermon begins. Practically no meeting in Athi River starts on time. When I go to a government school meeting, or a town meeting, I know that if I arrive at the announced time, I will wait one or two hours until things get going.

One difference between here and America is that most people enjoy long sermons. In Buru Buru parish, Nairobi, where I served before I came to Athi River, people complained that my sermons were too short. That was the first time I had heard such an observation in the 30-plus years as a priest.

And here, people watch me as I preach, especially the children. I don't know what they're thinking, or even whether they are listening or can understand my "Polish Kiswahili," as one parishioner calls it. She means no offense; my accent sounds heavy and European to her. But they certainly do watch me.

Singing at Mass is strong and peppy. We have no



Philippine Lay Missioner Nelly Abiog (right) prepares a Scripture reading in Kiswahili with a member of the youth club in Athi River, Kenya.

organ: songs are accompanied by drums and kayamba, a flat, seed- or pebble-filled rattle sounding not unlike Caribbean maracas. Sometimes we enjoy a dance down the aisle for an offertory procession.

The East African people are conservative in their worship customs. The bold African architecture, vestments and furnishings you might see depicted in magazines and books are mostly found in West Africa. With the exception of a free-standing altar, our sanctuaries have a pre-Vatican Council look. People love to sing as well as read and hear the Bible readings and prayers in their own language, or — in the case of the high schoolers — in English.

The most striking difference between Athi River and, say, Geneva, N.Y., is the matter of marriage customs.

Polygamy is not illegal here.

Of course, it is not sanctioned by most of the Christian churches, but the government allows it.

In fact, there are women in polygamous marriages

in both Buru Buru and Athi River parishes who have finished the course of instructions in the Catholic faith and long to be in full communion with the church. African customs and economic realities prevent them from changing their status, and Catholic canon law prevents us from receiving them into the church. This is one of the issues many priests and lay people would like discussed at the upcoming Synod for Africa, which will be held in a year or two.

Another aspect of the marriage tradition in East Africa is that there is a gradual, progressive finalization of marriage.

The first step is living together and having children, one or several. This, of course, is not unheard of in America. But the difference here is that culturally there is little shame or community disapproval about this arrangement. In African culture, it takes time for the couple and the families to get to know each other, and for the bride-price — usually sheep, goats or cattle — to be decided.

Even when the couple has met in an urban setting, far from family and home, they are reluctant to apply for either a government license or a church wedding until both families are satisfied with the arrangements. This can take years. We recently rejoiced when a Nairobi couple, regular church-goers and supporters, finally — after 12 children and about 20 years — reached an agreement with their families and were able to have a wedding.

The people of Athi River have a well-developed social consciousness. Their hospitality is the first thing a visitor notices. Knock on a door, or shout, "Hodi!" — "Howdy" — and you are welcome. If there is food, they will share it. Because there is usually no refrigerator, they will send a child out for milk to prepare tea or buy a soda of the visitor's choice.

Our people are generous to strangers, too. When the United Nations Commission for Refugees and the Kenya government used Athi River as a stop for 400 Ethiopian refugees on the way to Nairobi airport and home, several parishioners kept vigil until all the refugees arrived and received the food and shelter that was provided.

Through the efforts of Doy Castro and Ming Bersuela, 11 small Christian communities have been formed in the parish over a period of two years. Members meet for an hour each week to read the Scripture of the coming Sunday, share their experiences and reflections, pray intercessory prayer together, and plan community action as a group.

Continued on page 3a

**EDITORS' NOTE:** We chose to include this month's Insight feature, written by a diocesan priest currently serving in the missions, as part of our annual Mission & Vocation Supplement.