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Catholicism in Africa



Story by Rob Cullivan

Clergy speak of vibrant faith

When he was a boy, Bishop Simon A. Okafor, who currently heads the Diocese of Akwa, Nigeria, met Father Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi. The priest quizzed the young boy on his English, and the boy responded with a few phrases.

"He gave me a three-penny piece as a reward," recalled Bishop Okafor, 63, during an April 6 interview with the *Catholic Courier* in Rochester.

"That was a lot of money in those days," he added with a smile.

The bishop said he and dozens of other Nigerian priests he knows directly attribute their vocations to the example of Father Tansi, who died in 1964. On his March 21-23 trip to Nigeria, Pope John Paul II beatified Father Tansi, who reportedly persuaded many people he met to attend church, and who worked diligently for the education of children. Beatification is the last step the church takes before canonizing someone a saint.

"We all desired to be like (Father Tansi)," Bishop Okafor said, bemoaning the fact that he was unable to attend the March 22 beatification ceremony in Nigeria.

The bishop has been recovering from spinal surgery he had at St. Mary's Hospital in Rochester in March, and is staying at the Rochester apartment of one of his diocesan priests, Father Edwin S.C. Obiorah, a Rochester-area lawyer.

The bishop plans to return to Nigeria when his health permits, he said. The bishop added that when he does return, he plans to name a high school in his diocese after Father Tansi.

A vital church

The pope's recent visit to Nigeria focused the universal church's attention briefly on that nation's home continent of Africa, a region that often only makes the headlines for its wars and famines. But Africa is home to more than 100 million Catholics who, experts says, are preserving much of what is good about the church's past while making innovations that will shape its future.

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