

Africa

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In a phone interview with the *Courier*, Kevin James Lee, policy adviser for African Affairs to the U.S. Catholic Conference in Washington, D.C., spoke at length about several aspects of the church's presence in Africa, including the following points.

• **A sub-Saharan church:** Lee noted that the church has ancient roots in North Africa, but that area is predominantly Muslim now. However, Lee said that the church is strongly represented in such sub-Saharan countries as Rwanda, Burundi, Malawi, Ivory Coast and the Democratic Republic of the Congo — formerly Zaire.

• **Conservative and progressive:** Lee agreed with African Catholics who have said many African churches are "more Roman than Rome itself," strictly adhering, in most countries, to church teachings on sexuality, morality and liturgy. But Lee pointed out that the church in such places as South Africa can be quite liberal, its clergy calling for intercommunion with non-Catholics, at least on special occasions.

• **Shallow roots, deep roots:** Depending on the region, Lee said that the church in sub-Saharan Africa is greatly varied in its influence. For example, he said, in Rwanda the Hutu and Tutsi populations are both primarily Catholic, but Catholics slaughtered Catholics in the Rwandan civil strife and genocide of 1994, he said.

On the other hand, in places like Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa, the church is a well-respected voice for human rights, Lee explained. He pointed out that the church vocally opposed apartheid in South Africa during the 1980s when many other avenues of political expression were being blocked in that country.

• **Tensions with Muslims:** Some militant Muslims are seeking to create a non-Western, non-Christian, pan-African movement, Lee said, creating tensions with Catholics, particularly in urban areas. Then again, Lee agreed that many African families contain Muslims, Christians and adherents to traditional religions, a phe-

nomenon that encourages religious tolerance. He added that Pope John Paul II's meetings with Muslim leaders over the years have helped keep tensions at bay.

Whose mission to whom?

Father Obiorah, an attorney with Harris Beach and Wilcox in Rochester, assists on weekends at the churches that comprise the Cayuga Team Ministry cluster — St. Patrick's, Aurora; St. Joseph's, Cayuga; Our Lady of the Lake, King Ferry; and St. Michael's, Union Springs.

Father Obiorah is also one of a number of African priests and nuns currently working and/or studying in the diocese. Several spoke to the *Courier* about the church in their homelands and their views on the church here.

Having also lived in Europe, Father Obiorah stressed that he's used to adapting to cultures other than his own. Father Obiorah made that point because of the controversy over a November 1997 column by Father Richard P. McBrien whose weekly syndicated pieces are published in the *Courier*.

The column criticized U.S. dioceses that had "imported" foreign priests to help alleviate the priest shortage. In part, Father McBrien asked whether such priests could work well with lay people, and, in particular, women, who play many more roles in the U.S. church than they do in many foreign countries.

The resulting flap earned Father McBrien criticism for allegedly being anti-immigrant — even racist — since many foreign priests in the United States today are from Africa. The *Catholic Sun* in Syracuse even suspended the column indefinitely in January, in part because of the piece on foreign priests.

Father Obiorah, 38, said many African priests he knows in the United States like the fact that the U.S. church employs lay people in many liturgical roles, he said. He added that many also have no problem working with women in authority. He derided Father McBrien's ideas as racist.

"The church, by its very nature, is a missionary church," Father Obiorah said, noting that St. Paul was a foreign missionary.

"Since the church is universal, we think that priests from any part of the world should (be able to) work here. There is no group of people stamped 'missionary' and another that is stamped 'not.'"

Here and there

The church may be universal, but African priests serving in the Diocese of Rochester acknowledged that there are differences between how Catholicism is practiced here and in their native lands.

Father Ernest Udoh, 37, is a Nigerian priest on a one-year leave from his home Diocese of Uyo. He has been serving at St. Mary's Church in Waterloo.

Father Udoh said he is used to exuberant liturgies back home that are marked by strong singing and dancing. He added that he thinks that Catholic congregations here could become interested in Masses with more lively singing and dancing if they were encouraged to do so.

Like Father Obiorah and Bishop Okafor, Father Basil Wozogee, 58, is from the Awka Diocese. Currently on a one-year sabbatical from parish work in Nigeria, the priest assists at Immaculate Conception Church in Ithaca and St. Patrick's in Owego. To a certain extent, his liturgical views echoed those of Father Udoh.

A liturgist, Father Wozogee said that after the bread and wine have been consecrated, Catholics in his home parish dance.

"We have been waiting for the Lord, and he is here, so let's give him a dance," he said.

Such practices may appear somewhat exotic to many U.S. Catholics, but remove the physical expressions at Mass, and you'll find African Catholics adhere strictly to the church's liturgical norms, according to Father Nathaniel Kugute, 41, a priest of the Diocese of Mombasa in Kenya.

Currently living at the Basilian Fathers' house on East Avenue in Rochester, the priest is a graduate student in educational administration at the University of Rochester. He assists at Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Brighton.

Africans express their emotions at Mass far more than their U.S. counterparts, Father Kugute explained, but it's

not out of any sense of informality regarding the sacrament. In fact, he pointed out, Kenyan Catholics have tremendous reverence for the Eucharist. His fellow Kenyans kneel and bless themselves before tabernacles more than their U.S. counterparts, he said.

Father Severine Msemwa, 51, a Tanzanian priest from the Diocese of Tanga, said Tanzanian Catholics would find it a bit odd to see women taking on the liturgical roles they play here. He noted that the movement to ordain women to the priesthood is not one that generally concerns Catholics in Tanzania.

"A woman, according to our culture, has not been brought to offer sacrifice or give the word to men," said Father Msemwa, who studies at Elmira College and assists at St. Casimir's Church there.

A woman's view

Father Msemwa's fellow countrywoman, Sister Serapia Nyambo, is a member of the Congregation of Our Lady of Usambra. An undergraduate at Nazareth College, the 32-year-old nun — who grew up in the shadow of Mount Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest point — currently resides at the Sisters of St. Joseph Motherhouse in Rochester, along with her fellow congregational member and Tanzanian, Sister Agnesia Mweta.

Sister Nyambo agreed with her male African colleagues that many African women — especially those struggling with poverty — are not concerned about issues like women's ordination. However, although she doesn't want to be a priest, she herself would not oppose women's ordination, she said.

She added that her native church's lay people lead Bible study groups, catechize one another, and participate in such rituals as public devotional processions. Tanzanian Catholics do need material aid to build new churches and alleviate poverty, but the Tanzanian Catholic Church is nonetheless quite vibrant, she concluded.

"Some people think the church is the building, but for me, the church is not the building, the church is everywhere," she said. "The church is where you live."

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