

In the Heartland
The Catholic Church in Africa is very much alive

By Bishop Richard Pates
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Forty nine years ago, two classmates and I from the North American College arranged to exercise our transitional diaconate ministry in the Diocese of Mzuzu, Malawi in central Africa.

Transportation to that part of the world was limited. With lost baggage and the meager availability of flights, our journey to Malawi was extended by about a week, most of which time was highly adventurous.

When we did arrive, we were assigned to different parishes. My assignment was in Karonga on the northern tip of Malawi. The priests and brothers we served with were White Fathers of Africa. They were assisted by a newly formed community of religious women, the Rosarian Sisters. Karonga is situated close to Lake Malawi. Lake Malawi, is the ninth largest lake in the world and the third largest and second deepest lake in Africa. The natural beauty and habitat for so many African animals and plant species were fascinating.

Each parish in the Mzuzu diocese had about 10 rural outstations attached to it, each of which was led by a catechist. Travel to these outposts was problematic. Food and other provisions were hard to come by. The spirit and activity of Christians, however, were highly inspiring. The catechumens and others pursuing the faith were dedicated to the journey and the peoples' native faith experience blended well with the Gospel message. The new converts were open to the church community and the reception of Christianity was welcomed in the context of the prevailing culture.

This past month, after a 49-year interlude, I visited Karonga and experienced a Rip Van Winkle moment in so doing. Karonga itself has been transformed into a diocese having been separated

from Mzuzu to the south. The city is undergoing significant expansion and updating. Serious challenges remain as to improving the infrastructure. Roads are particularly in need of work. It is startling to see the old interfacing with current developments. For instance, picture a woman balancing a heavy load which she is carrying handless on her head while simultaneously speaking on a cell phone.

Being a diocese, the local community has built a new cathedral which is a tribute to their resourcefulness. The church and rectory, where I lived in my ministry, are both history. The church was the victim of an earthquake three years ago. Its replacement is undergoing construction which is temporarily suspended in order to obtain sufficient funds to continue.

The clergy of the diocese has changed from being all European to nearly all African. The first bishop, Martin Mtumbuka, in service for seven years, is remarkably dynamic with abundant energy and clear vision. He has overseen the construction of the new cathedral and bishop's house, which, in effect, is a community center for the diocese. During the few days I was there, I was involved with the establishment of the new St. John Paul II Parish, the launching of a new catechism and a celebration with St. Mary's Parish where I had served.

Bishop Mtumbuka visited Des Moines last Labor Day. The parishioners of St. Pius X in Urbandale were most responsive at the Masses he preached in request for support. He was also fascinated by the farm production of Pete and Dana Wenstrand in Essex, Iowa. It filled him with possibilities of rural and agricultural upgrades in his own diocese. Presently, he is overseeing an irrigation development which would potentially double the annual production on the land in question. Given the extreme poverty in his diocese, such would lead to a remarkable lifestyle enhancement for the farmers involved.

Another stop on the African trip was to the Diocese of Konongo-Mampong in Ghana. The bishop, Joseph Osei-Bonsu, invited me to come to the diocese to be the ordaining bishop of 15 new priests: 14 were from the diocese; the 15th ordained was from the community of the Missionaries of Africa and the brother of Father Dominic Yamoah who most recently served as pastor in Clarinda, Bedford and Villisca.

The ordination ceremony was beautifully celebrated in an open field with about 3,000 participating from every age range. The ordination in and of itself is a beautiful rite as was the case in this instance. The music accompanying the service was particularly striking. It reflected the African tradition with native instruments and dancing. Depending on the moment of the liturgy, it was joyful and exuberant and then also took on an appropriate character during the solemn parts of the Mass.

A particularly engaging part of the liturgy is the offertory procession. The priests of the Diocese of Konongo-Mampong do not receive a specified amount of compensation every month. Instead, they are supported directly by the parishioners and the provisions they provide, which often are presented in the offertory procession. On this occasion, the donations were extensive including a live goat, cow and chicken in addition to other items such as water, food and even toilet paper and other household items. The most resistant participant in the procession was the goat who audibly, in loud fashion, manifested his displeasure.

The ordination celebration lasted some five hours with abundant music and ceremony along with traditional speeches, etc. I was the only Caucasian present. One of the priests who attended said he, along with others, was very surprised that a white man could endure such a prolonged event!

Bishop Osei-Bonsu has served for 22 years as Ordinary of the diocese. He is its first bishop. He is gifted. He is a classmate of Cardinal Peter Turkson who is Prefect of the Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development at the Vatican and Archbishop emeritus of Cape Coast, Ghana. Bishop Osei-Bonsu is a scripture scholar and has written two books, the most recent a study of the Mass. He has served two terms as president of the Ghanaian Catholic Bishops' Conference.

The Diocese of Konongo-Mampong has 50 parishes and some 75 priests. The placement of the 14 new priests in parochial assignments is a work that is challenging but from an American perspective highly enviable.

As a part of the practice of priest utilization, the bishop encourages young priests to take up pastoral service in other countries. The reason he does so is to assist specified countries with new priests to respond to missionary needs. This service, in and of itself, provides personal development in the individual's priesthood and enriches his future ministry in Ghana. The appointments also provide the opportunity, especially through the internet, to attain further education. I have found that typically the African priest has a thirst for ongoing learning.

The Diocese of Des Moines, which has welcomed Bishop Osei-Bonsu on a visit, is currently blessed with five priests from the diocese: Father Mark Owusu, pastor of St. Catherine Parish in Des Moines; Father Dominic Assim of Assumption Parish in Granger; Father Daniel Danso pastor of St. Patrick Parish in Neola and St. Columbanus in Weston; Father Francis Amoako a chaplain for Mercy Medical Center in Des Moines and Father Bright Appiahagyei the chaplain for St. Albert School in Council Bluffs. In addition, we are fortunate to have two priests from the Archdiocese of Accra in Ghana, Father James Ahenkora, pastor of St. John in Greenfield and St. Patrick in Massena and Father Raphael Assamah at St. Mary in Shenandoah and St. Mary in Hamburg.

Accompanied by Father Dominic Assim, I had the great pleasure of visiting the homes and families of the five Konongo-Mampong priests serving Des Moines. As you might imagine, they come from faith-filled and supportive parents and siblings.

I was very blessed to have had the opportunity to visit Africa and the two dioceses described above. Moreover, it is my great fortune to have a special friendship with Bishop Osei-Bonsu. We share a common appreciation for the international dimension of the evolving Catholic Church. Dioceses, countries, continents, etc., represent unique cultures and traditions. At the same time, there is a universal character that enables us to pursue the unity of the one Church which Jesus envisioned: "That they be all one." With unity comes enrichment and vision so much needed in the shrinking world of today.

As I reflect on my recent trip, the one conclusion is: The Catholic Church in Africa is very much alive!