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A quick pulse of women religious in Africa

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 23, 2009

Woman religious in Cameroon (CNS photo)

Yaoundè, Cameroon

One subtext during Benedict XVI?s trip to Africa has been the pope?s repeated references to the rights and dignity of women. In a speech on March 18th to the bishops of Cameroon, Benedict called upon African Catholics to defend ?the dignity of women and their particular vocation in the ecclesial community and in society.? In Angola, the pope denounced ?the special yoke of discrimination that women and girls often endure.? The working paper for the upcoming Synod for Africa also highlights the dignity of women.

To get a woman?s perspective on all this, NCR sat down with Sr. Anastasie Bekono of the Servants of the Holy Heart of Mary, a congregation founded in France in the 19th century which today has a flourishing community in Cameroon. Bekono directs a vocational school for girls in Yaoundè, attempting to give young women from modest backgrounds the possibility of making a living. Bekono, who grew up in a rural village outside Yaoundè, was accompanied by Grace Atem, a young novice from the English-speaking city of Buea in southwest Cameroon.

The conversation seemed to confirm, yet also to nuance, impressions that religious life in Africa is often more ?conservative? than in the West. Bekono, for example, expressed shock that a religious sister might defend a woman?s right to choose abortion, and neither African supported the idea of women priests. Yet both expressed frustration that women are under-represented in leadership positions in the church, a sentiment they often share with sisters elsewhere, and Bekono voiced deep admiration for the foreign sisters she knows. Regarding women?s communities in Europe and the United States, she refused to join the critics: ?They may have changed their lifestyle, but not their faith.?

The full text of the interview follows.

Tell me about your community.

Bekono: The Servants of the Holy Heart of Mary was founded in France in 1866. Some sisters came from France in 1953 to spread the gospel in a neighborhood near Yaoundè. They specialized in education and health. Later, sisters from Canada came to take the place of the French. Worldwide, we have about 500 sisters, with 40

here in Cameroon. This is the only country where we have a presence in Africa. We still work in education and health, spreading the gospel, and we?ve also begun to work in development. We have nursery schools, vocational schools like the one here, and also religious training.

When you say ?development,? what does that mean?

tBekono: I experienced what we mean by development in my own village where I grew up, not far from here. The village didn?t have any running water, but the sisters helped raise money to build wells. They figured out a way of doing it that dramatically lowered the price. A well that ordinarily would have cost $5,000 only cost us about $600.

You have 40 sisters today. Is that number growing?

tBekono: Yes, we are attracting quite a few vocations, especially in the Anglophone areas. We built a center there and discovered many new vocations. There are quite a few girls trying to knock at our door, and we hope the number will continue to increase.

Why are you getting more vocations from the Anglophone area?

tBekono: The Anglophone area is very Christianized. Many people devote their lives to God and to the gospel. They?re very welcoming of it. All you have to do is look at the families ? if there are five children, it?s not unusual for a boy to be a priest and a couple of girls to be sisters. In the Francophone areas, including here in Yaoundè, sometimes people aren?t so close to the gospel, aren?t so open to it. For example, in the southwest, during Lent, they do the Stations of the Cross every day, but here we only do the Stations of the Cross on Fridays. There?s more of a tendency to downplay the faith. In part, that may be because there?s more temptation around here, with nightclubs and so on.

tAtem: What she says is true. It goes back to our forefathers. Our families are very religious, our grandparents and our parents, and they bring us up that way. They make sure we go to Mass every day. Lent is treated as a sacred period, in which you pray often. There?s Stations of the Cross every day, and somebody go to church twice a day, especially the grandmothers. That spirit inspired us as youths, to follow our parents and our grandparents.

Vocations are growing all across Africa. Why do you think that is?

tBekono: Obviously, the first answer is that God has blessed us. Beyond that, I think there are probably two factors. One has to do with the role of women in African society. In Europe, in the past, women were not allowed to do many things, but they were welcomed in the church. By serving the church, they felt they were useful to society. That?s why many joined. In Africa, there?s still work to do in terms of women?s emancipation, and some women still feel there?s more room for them in the church than in the broader society. They feel more useful in the church. The other factor has to do with family size. In Europe today, there are fewer families and they tend to be smaller, which naturally means fewer vocations. In Canada, at one time you had families with ten children, and it was natural for two or three to enter religious life. Now one sees families with no children, or with one or two. African families, however, still tend to be quite large, and that creates room for vocations.

Here?s the reason I ask. Europe was once very religious, but as it became rich, it became less religious. Some say that as Africa becomes more developed, it too will become less religious. Do you believe that?

tBekono: It could be that as Africa becomes richer, spirituality will decline. It?s often true that to welcome God, you need to have the heart of a poor person. Our own congregation?s story in Canada offers an example. At a

time when they weren?t very rich, there were a lot of vocations. Once people got money, they became less religious. The same thing happens in the big cities in Cameroon, in Douala and Yaoundè. You see young people who wouldn?t even think of giving a place to Jesus in their hearts.

Let?s test that theory. You both agree that in Cameroon, the Anglophone region tends to be more intensely religious than the Francophone region. Is it also poorer?

Atem: No, there are resources where I come from, there?s wealth. It?s true that the Francophone region controls the money in Cameroon, but that doesn?t mean we live in terrible poverty. The average family, the average household, is no worse off than in the Francophone region. They have three hot meals a day, they have a home, and so on. They?re fine.

So it?s not just the money.

Bekono: No, I don?t think so. Take President Biya, for example. Despite the fact that he?s obviously not poor, he doesn?t deny his faith. During the papal Mass, he took holy communion in front of everybody. Obviously that?s just one example, but it makes a point. Respect for ancestors is very strong in African culture, and so is respect for God. There are many Africans who are quite wealthy, but they remain very Christian. I think that as Africa becomes more developed, it may well influence the culture to some extent, but I think for the most part that our religious conviction will remain.

I?ve asked the same question of Archbishop John Onaiyekan of Nigeria, who says it?s based on Western arrogance ? the hidden assumption being that once Africa grows up, it will be more like us.

tBekono: Yes, I agree. It?s true. I believe that Africa, no matter how rich it grows, will not lose its faith. I pray for that.

Coming to religious life, would you say that many women in Africa pursue a religious vocation simply to escape poverty?

tBekono: It may be that some young girls join the order because they?re running away from poverty. But, those who come for that reason don?t last long. There?s a kind of poverty inside religious life that is actually much harder to endure than the poverty one finds in the outside world, unless you?re truly committed to it. It?s hard, it requires sacrifice. African women these days generally want to be emancipated, they want to be free to do what they like. When you join the order, however, you can?t just do what you like, so unless you really want to be there, it?s not going to work. For example, I have a sister who still lives in our village. She?s very poor, yet whenever there?s a big event, she?s able to donate a goat, a sheep, or a pig. Sometimes she?ll give up to $50, which is more than I could ever give as a nun. If I had been running away from my village top escape poverty, I came to the wrong place!

You know many sisters from other parts of the world. What are the main differences with religious life in Africa?

tBekono: In my experience, the way of life within religious communities is influenced by the broader society in which they?re situated. When I visited our congregation in Canada, for example, I had the sense that it had a somewhat relativized approach to a few traditional aspects of our life, which probably is shaped by the culture. It?s the same in the States. There, for example, you can sometimes find a sister who lives in an apartment. Here, that would be impossible. Togetherness is important ? we have to live as a community, we have to be together. That?s given far more value here than what I saw abroad. Habits are another example. Here, when a young sister joins the order, she wants to wear the habit. It?s not the same in the West; if you put on a head covering, for example, they?ll probably tell you to take it off because it?s unnecessary. Here, when I go to the village, in

order not to scandalize the faithful I have to dress as a nun. They expect it.

Some critics say that sisters in the West have lost their faith. Do you think that?s true?

tBekono: No. I look at the elderly sisters from the West who live among us here, those who are maybe 60 or more. When I see them praying, when I see the devotion they still have despite their advanced age, I can?t say that. My impression is that Western nuns changed their lifestyle, but they didn?t change their faith. I?ve also met young sisters coming from Western countries. We have a novice here from Canada, a young girl who before long will be taking her vows. She has not lost her faith. She?s truly convinced that she made the right choice to join the order, despite everything she?s given up. My sense is that those sisters in the West who actually lost their faith have already left. Those who remain, I think, truly believe.

There?s a perception that sisters from Europe and the United States tend to be liberal, while sisters in Africa are generally more conservative. Do you think that?s true?

tBekono: Again, I think this is probably influenced by the society. When I joined the order, I joined as an African, with my culture and my values. I?m attached to those values, and I suppose that may make me seem conservative in the eyes of others, but this is who I am.

Let?s take a concrete case. There are some sisters in the United States who are personally opposed to abortion, but who would support a woman?s right to make that choice. How do you think sisters here would react to that?

tBekono: We would think it?s a scandal. .. Personally, I think it?s a very dangerous position. If you support a woman?s right to choose to have an abortion, there?s a very fine line between that and actually helping her to have an abortion if she makes that choice. It?s a dangerous, scandalous position, and I couldn?t bear it.

Some sisters who have taken this position publicly have been punished.

tBekono: That?s good!

What?s the situation women face in the broader society in Cameroon today?

tThere?s a lot of improvement, and I have to say that the state has made many efforts to acknowledge women. I am not a feminist, but I do believe that women build the families in this country, and that in the past, that work was never acknowledged. As a result, women were always behind and the men ahead. Now things are more equal, so that women and men more often see each other as partners, and men are sharing the work of taking care of their families. We never saw that in the past. The same thing is true in education. In the past, young girls were not allowed to go to school, but now they go, and lo and behold we see that the girls are ? well, I won?t say more intelligent, but at least as intelligent as the boys.

If you?re a young girl in Cameroon today, and your dream is to be a doctor or a lawyer, is at as easy for a young girl to pursue that dream as for a boy?

tBekono: In theory, yes, and many young women now become successful professionals. On the other hand, women face one possible roadblock that men don?t, which is the possibility of becoming pregnant. If a girl gets pregnant, she has to either give up that dream, or at least delay it. After the pregnancy, of course, she has to take care of the family. The weight of responsibility of running a house often slows down their ambitions.

The pope mentioned several specific issues facing women in African society, so let me ask you about a couple. The first was sexual violence.

tBekono: That?s a serious problem in this society. I can?t talk in terms of percentages, of exactly how common it is, but I know it happens. I?ve heard of cases in the north, for example, where young girls are sexually abused. Sometimes it happens under the guise of marriage, in the sense that girls are pressured into marrying at a very early age in order to satisfy the desires of the husband. It?s even happened that once the husband no longer finds the girl pleasing, he simply sends her back to her family. I?m sure it?s happened even to some of the girls in this school, but I wouldn?t have any idea about numbers, how many cases we?re talking about.

What about polygamy?

t Bekono: This is a form of discrimination against women, because there?s no such thing in the world as a woman who truly wants to share her husband. Of course, that?s not the only difficulty it creates. Let me talk about my own family. My grandfather was the chief in our village, and he had 100 wives. My father saw the suffering that situation created, and he decided he would not take many wives. Here?s an example of what I mean: No one man can possibly satisfy 100 wives, and a result, there many cases of adultery. Many of the women got pregnant from these affairs, and obviously those children didn?t look like the chief. My father, who was actually the son of the chief, saw how these other children suffered because they were considered illegitimate. It caused huge disorder in the family, and my father decided he didn?t want to create similar situations. My brothers in our family today would never even consider having more than one wife. I think this is something that was more common in my grandfather?s generation, but now it?s passing away.

Let?s finish by talking about women inside the church. Do you feel like full partners in the Catholic church in Cameroon?

tBekono: Yes. Women are part of the church. You can see that at the church services, all the contributions women make. As a matter of fact, at Sunday Mass you generally see many more women than men. They pray, they?re very active in the church, they give their time and services to the church.

But are women also leaders in the church?

tBekono: Not much.

tAtem: I don?t agree with that. Where I come from, we have many small Christian communities and many apostolic societies, and many of the leaders of those groups are women. I was a promoter in one of these groups, and there are lots of them. I think that?s important, because women do bring something different to the church. Men always think in terms of power and superiority, but women have a different instinct that I believe the church badly needs.

tBekono: It?s true that in some groups you can see women holding leadership positions. But when it comes to decision-making in the church, you won?t see many women. Even the pope?s visit shows this ? the pope came to Cameroon and he met the bishops, he met the Muslims, he met politicians, but he did not meet with women.

tAtem: That?s true. The church talks about the whole idea of the place of women, as if women are no longer left behind. But women are left behind, and even the pope proves it. As my sister said, he met with the bishops, but he didn?t call in all the superiors of religious orders to see what they?re up to.

Some critics would say that women will never be full partners in the church until they can become priests. Do you agree?

tBekono: Women don?t need to be priests to be partners. There are many things that can be done within the church that don?t require being a priest. For example, women can hold offices in dioceses and in the episcopal conference.

Would you support the idea of women priests?

tBekono: No. I?m used to the way things are. The apostles were all men, so it makes sense that only men are priests. It?s our tradition to have men as the pastors of the church. If it should happen one day that the church would decide to have women priests, I would accept it, but I don?t really want it.

tAtem: I agree that women don?t need to be priests to take their place in the church. I don?t wish to see women priests, because it is not our tradition. If the church should make that decision, if the pope were to decide that this is what should happen, then I would go along, but it?s not my desire.

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