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Ugandan Catholics form new church with celibacy option for clergy

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KAMPALA, UGANDA -- Twenty renegade Catholic priests who are either married or want to marry have broken from the mainstream Roman Catholic church in Uganda and formed a new church where celibacy is not required.

After urging from the Kampala archdiocese, the Ugandan government said Jan. 8 that it was investigating the breakaway Catholic Apostolic National Church in Uganda and would ban it if found to be illegal. Vatican officials said the priests were now considered ?outside? the Catholic church and would likely be excommunicated.

The creation of the splinter church underscored the increasingly vexing problem of enforcing celibacy for Roman Catholic priests in Africa, which has the world?s fastest-growing Catholic population but where there have been several cases of priests living openly with women and fathering children.

Earlier this year, the Vatican summoned African bishops to Rome for a three-week meeting on the church in Africa, and celibacy was a key topic of discussion. The Vatican, however, has remained firm that priests must not marry, although there are exceptions for priests of the Eastern rite and for converts from Anglicanism.

The breakaway Ugandan church has as its head a former Zambian Catholic priest, Fr. Luciano Anzanga Mbewe, who was excommunicated earlier this year for having founded what the Vatican called a schismatic church, the Catholic Apostolic National Church of Zambia, which allows for a married priesthood.

The Ugandan offshoot is located in the eastern town of Jinja. Mbewe is expected to visit soon to officially launch the church and ordain new priests, said Fr. Leonard Lubega, who says he has been appointed bishop-elect by Mbewe.

?We are Catholics but not Roman Catholics,? Lubega said, adding that the new church, while not under Pope Benedict XVI, recognizes him and prays for him.

Archbishop Cyprian Kizito Lwanga and Cardinal Emmanuel Wamala, the current and retired archbishops of Kampala, have denounced the new church.

Archdiocesan sources say Lubega was never ordained a Catholic priest and another priest in the new church, Fr. Matovu Seguya, has until recently been serving as an Orthodox priest in Mityana.

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