

## Celibacy prime block to African vocations

Steve Askin | Mar. 22, 2010

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Catholics in Africa -- Analysis  
Mwingi, Kitui Diocese, Kenya

More than 1,000 smiling, chanting, dancing people crowded onto the Muiasa family's small plot of land outside the eastern Kenya market town of Kitui. The parish priest had spent all afternoon ferrying them here in his pickup truck, but the dusty road out of Kitui was crowded with pedestrians -- all headed for the celebration -- until long after sunset.

When the festivities began, priests and nuns almost danced their enthusiastic speeches. The whole community turned out -- Catholics, Protestants and followers of traditional religions -- and all roared with cheers and ululations as women from nearby Catholic churches and rural chapels pranced out of the crowd to add their heavy sacks of maize to the enormous pile of grain, more than a ton, given to the Muiasas as a sort of *lobola* or dowry.

It looked like a traditional wedding eve party for the bride's family, but was one of the more unusual attempts to graft African ritual onto a distinctly Catholic event: the ordination of a priest. "We call it getting married to the church, not married to a woman," said Father Peter Mwema, who had been ordained to the Kitui diocese a few weeks earlier.

Priest-to-be Charles Muiasa, preaching for vocations on the eve of his ordination, likened himself to one who swam an ocean to find one tasty piece of fruit -- the priesthood. Now that he has made this difficult journey, others should know they, too, can swim the ocean. The next day, at ordination, traditional symbols of leadership were offered as gifts for the new priest: a stool, a staff, a bow and arrow. The result was a joyous, song-filled open-air service. Most important, the ceremony honored Muiasa's parents for contributing a son to the church. At one point, they came forward and danced in front of the improvised outdoor altar.

Other Kenyan dioceses use different means to add African symbolism to the ordination ceremony. In some places, a man is twice ordained, first in tribal dress, then in a priestly cassock.

Yet familiar imagery alone will not solve Africa's vocations crisis. This continent has the world's fastest-growing Catholic community, and the gap between new vocations and missionary deaths or retirements remains enormous, according to Missionary of Africa Father Aylward Shorter, a leading British scholar of the African church. He estimates that each year Africa has 200 fewer priest to serve two million more Catholics.

Celibacy -- more specifically, parental and community distress at the thought that a young man will not continue the family by having children -- is one of the main obstacles to priestly vocations in Kenya, as throughout much of Africa.

Though the First World church also has celibacy problems, Africa's are more fundamental.

In the U.S. and Europe, critics often argue that celibacy has become impractical: Ordaining married men could ease the priest shortage and produce a clergy with deeper understanding of family life. The same issue is sometimes raised here, with greater urgency, because the priest shortage is more severe.

But Africa also has a deeper celibacy problem. To many Africans, celibacy seems irresponsible, even immoral. It conflicts with a widely shared belief that each man is responsible for producing children to maintain a chain of life that links ancestors, those now living and the unborn. These intensely life-affirming values explain why Africans tend to readily accept Catholic teaching against birth control and abortion, but rebel against the demand for a celibate clergy. Celibacy is seen not as self-sacrifice, but self-indulgence: By refusing to marry, the priest shirks his duty to family and community.

In most of Kenya's traditional cultures, the wife "marries into" her husband's family. Their children contribute to his line of descent. Like a daughter getting married, a man who becomes a priest is "leaving" the family of his birth. A woman who wishes to become a nun is less apt than a would-be priest to face family resistance, because otherwise she would eventually marry out of the family.

A young American may leave seminary for "personal reasons": He is in love and wants to marry. Family pressure -- parental insistence on marriage -- is the most common reason Kenyan priesthood candidates drop out, said Maryknoll Father Richard Quinn, a television producer who has visited every seminary in Kenya while preparing a vocations video for the Kenyan episcopal conference. Even the most devout Catholics may feel priesthood is for someone else's son.

"African cultures do not find in permanent celibacy an authentic human value that deserves to be lived," acknowledged Father Matungulu Otene, a Jesuit from Zaire, in a widely circulated pamphlet designed to explain celibacy to families and friends of Catholic religions. "Failure to have children is a great humiliation, a misfortune for which neither material wealth nor moral qualities can compensate."

Otene argued that African values must change to conform to church teaching, because "it is absolutely against Christianity" to insist on "a fruitfulness that is exclusively biological."

In the 1960s and 1970s, many African bishops took an opposite position, arguing that celibacy does not work in Africa. Most stopped talking publicly on the issue when Rome firmly rejected all proposals for a married clergy.

This is one reason the Catholic clergy remains a mostly foreign institution across much of Africa. In Kenya, about three of four priests are foreigners, even after 100 years of missionary activity.

Some countries do better. In war-torn Uganda, seminaries are overflowing. Intensely Catholic Igboland in eastern Nigeria, where the predominantly Irish missionary clergy was expelled en masse in the early 1970s because of its support for the Biafran secession, has built the world's largest seminary. The region produces more priests than it can use and is exporting missionaries to other parts of Africa. But these areas are the exceptions.

In Kenya, parents have been known to curse sons who "betray" the family by accepting celibacy. Some mothers threaten suicide in an attempt to dissuade their sons. A few years ago, the mother of one seminarian in western Kenya -- heartsick that her son would never have children -- killed herself on the eve of his ordination.

Here in Kitui, the bishop, Father William Dunne, speaks the local language, Kamba, with an Irish accent. He is well-liked by local people for his easygoing manner, respect for local culture and efforts to incorporate African

styles of worship into Catholic liturgy. Dunne is proud that his diocese ordained five priests last year, almost doubling its complement of Kenyan clerics to 12. Yet Dunne's countrymen still staff most Kitui parishes, and their rectories are little enclaves of Ireland.

Kitui's new priests, chatting with *NCR* as they sat around a coffee table in a rectory -- piled high with newspapers and magazines from Dublin -- the day before Charles Muiasa's ordination, agreed that parental objections were the biggest obstacle they had to overcome before becoming priests.

It is easier if parents do not understand the priesthood, Muiasa said. This may be why many Catholic clerics come from non-Christian families. Muiasa's father has been a priest in the traditional religion of the Kamba, Kenya's fourth largest tribe. "My father's attitude is that it is a contract for a certain number of years, and then you come out and marry," he said. "I will not be quick to explain."

A visitor from western Kenya, 26-year-old Father Henri Simarro of Eldoret diocese, said he faced "no opposition, because my parents aren't Catholic and didn't understand." His parents "feel I'm too young to marry and assume sooner or later I'll find a wife."

"Let's not be superficial about this," said one of Muiasa's seminary classmates, 32-year-old Father Nicodemus Kitaka, a former herdsman and now a powerful, deep-voiced preacher. "A Kamba person who is not married is like a child and has no place in society. There are people who feel sure that these white fathers from Europe have wives and children at home. They can't believe that someone would really be unmarried."

For Kitaka, becoming a priest meant entering a strange new world, and not just because of celibacy. Kitaka felt a powerful internal call to the priesthood -- and fought it. "The seminary was not my idea," he said. "The idea looked for me. I was so angry that I asked God, 'Why did you do this to me?' " Having grown up outdoors herding cattle and hunting -- he did not start primary school until age 13 -- seminary seemed a prison. "It was not until my fifth year that I got used to being confined inside."

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