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Lay Africans, nuns feel marginalized

Mwansa Pintu Catholic News Service | Sep. 3, 2010

LUSAKA, Zambia -- Laypeople and women religious across Africa are concerned that they are being marginalized by clergy as they undertake pastoral work, despite a call from last October's Synod of Bishops for Africa to include all people in ministry.

Members of both groups told Catholic News Service their evangelization activities have been underfunded, and some said they have been left out of the synod process since the beginning.

Some lay leaders and women religious who participated in recent synod implementation workshops conducted by the Zambian bishops said priests have threatened to discipline them if they disobeyed clerical directives.

Similar concerns have arisen in Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Malawi and Kenya.

Sister Mary Musonda of the Religious Sisters of Charity said her congregation's work in parishes was being frustrated by some local priests and that her community is considering focusing its efforts on health and education duties alone.

"We are seriously thinking of completely pulling out of pastoral work to concentrate on other duties," she said in an interview. "We are always being told it is the responsibility of priests to preach the Gospel because they are ordained for that purpose."

Church liturgical norms say that nonconsecrated people -- including nuns -- may not preach the homily at Mass, although they can preach in other situations.

The Zambian bishops' workshops where many expressed concerns were held to discuss implementing the synod's 57 propositions, or recommendations. The recommendations focused on reconciliation, peace and unity among all people regardless of tribal or cultural backgrounds.

Jerome Mumbi, a member of St. Andrew Parish in Mpika, told one such workshop that marginalization by some priests also extended to laypeople.

"Yet the synod made it very clear that every Christian, man or women, priest or not, should get involved in the process of evangelization," Mumbi told a gathering at the Mpika Pastoral Center. "However, what is happening here leaves much to be desired."

He said some priests refused to allocate funds to lay pastoral programs, thus killing the programs.

"We are all actors in the process of spreading the good news. The inspiration and courage to do so come from the Holy Spirit. I find it sad, therefore, that some priests could claim to be sole experts in that area," said Maria Mulebi, a parishioner of Mpika's Our Lady of Lourdes Parish.

Similar claims were voiced in the Mansa Diocese in northern Zambia, where some participants told a meeting

they had been left out of the synod's implementation process from the beginning.

"All we have been made to understand is that the synod only concerns our bishops, priests and sisters and not us," said Christian Chola, a parishioner at St. Stephen Parish in Kabunda, a small Catholic mission station west of Mansa. "We did not know that. As Christians, we can also play a role."

Catholics elsewhere in Africa echoed similar concerns.

Chifundo Harawa, who worships at the Cathedral of Our Lady in Limbe, Malawi, said that although the country's Catholic Church has tried to involve the laypeople and nuns in the synod process, a bias toward a more prominent role for priests exists.

"The whole process is usually championed by priests," Harawa said in an e-mail. "The lay faithful, and even sisters, are in most cases simply part of the audience as 'passengers.'"

In Tanzania, Sister Vera Bosco of the Kilimanjaro Sisters based in Mwanza, confirmed that priests have stopped nonconsecrated people from preaching at Mass, but she said evangelization can take many other forms.

At the same time, Sister Vera said she believes the Tanzanian church has involved as many people as possible in the synod process but that priests have taken a lead role.

"Obviously, priests have to lead the process because they understand it better," she said.

"It's true, we have heard stories of some priests allocating all funds to their work and hence denying other groups the opportunity to implement their own pastoral programs. But that's just a case of people being overzealous because everyone is capable of such work," said Sister Vera.

Dominican Sister Petra Nyati of Hwange, Zimbabwe, said that as long as mistrust and antagonism continue in the African church, implementation of the total evangelization of the continent as demanded by the synod would not be easy.

Jerome Njoki of Rumuruti Catholic Parish in the Diocese of Kitui, Kenya, said he has seen the conflict among sisters, laypeople and priests decline as clergy gradually understand that the other groups have an equally important role to play in evangelization and ministry.

Such divisions among Catholics pose serious challenges as the church strives to implement the synod's recommendations, said Jesuit Father Peter Henriot, director of the Jesuit Center for Theological Reflection in Lusaka, the Zambian capital.

The church first must deal with internal conflicts, promoting reconciliation and unity among priests, women religious and lay leaders in order to work toward a common goal, he said.

"'A house that is divided cannot stand' and, equally, unless the church works as a family, it cannot preach reconciliation, peace and unity," Father Henriot said.

In response to the rising concerns, Father Justin Matepa, national pastoral coordinator at the Zambian bishops' conference, disputed claims that priests stop anyone other than clergy from preaching.

"Those saying that are lying," he said. "There are lots of churches where the priest is not always around and people that preach and do pastoral work are either sisters or prayer leaders. I would agree if they complained about unequal sharing of resources for such activities between the priest and the other people involved in pastoral work."

Father Matepa added there was nothing that forces any priest to stop someone from preaching "as long as they are trained for it."

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