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Nairobi's cathedral draws worshippers to noon weekday mass

Christina S.N. Lewis | Jan. 7, 2011

Africa is one of Catholicism's great success story of the 20th century, yet after just a few days I am seeing signs that the church is facing some challenges here in Kenya.

Nairobi's cathedral is in the heart of Nairobi's downtown. One way to illustrate how central the Holy Family Minor Basilica Cathedral Church is may be to point out that it's next to the city council building and not far from parliament.

The Cathedral is the anchor of a large Catholic compound in the middle of the city center. Within there's a busy bookshop run by the Pauline Sisters, offices, a school filled with elementary school students in blue and white uniforms, as well as a large and car jammed parking lot.

I stepped inside the church during a lunch time service. It was Friday -- New Year's Eve. The pews of the large church were half full; perhaps some 400 or more people were inside. Many African Catholics go to daily mass and so the lunchtime service is popular.

As the priest celebrated the Eucharist I felt a welcoming familiarity. Three large flat screens hung on the church walls to allow parishioners to see close ups of their pastor's face. After receiving communion to the sound of "Angels We Have Heard on High," the gathering sang weakly other hymns, some rather weakly in English, and others more enthusiastically in Swahili. When mass ended the attendants gave a single loud clap before filing out.

I caught up with two women in casual work clothes as they left the church,
Monica Sang and Fhelisters Anihondo, both 32. Here's an excerpt of me speaking with Monica.

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***NCR*: How often do you come here?**

Monica: We come every day. We work a five minute walk from here. This is the largest church in Nairobi. On Sundays I worship in a different church.

Tell me about Catholicism in Kenya?

It has spread in Kenya compared to other countries. But now other denominations are taking people from us. Some are leaving the Church.

Why?

It's because people said they have seen miracles. ... But they are wrong. ... If they read the Bible, they?d be warned of false prophets. They don?t know they are being fooled. Their minds are confused.

But you are Catholic?

I'm ish-ish now. (She holds up her left hand outstretched and wobbles it from side to side). Sometimes I feel in the Catholic ... Sometimes it's not there. That spiritual growth. That's the thing that?s lacking. It?s okay, but you're looking for that (and here she pumps her left fist up in a decisive uppercut) that oomph.

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Maybe her feelings had to do with the somewhat staid liturgical service we had just witnessed. I will keep an eye out for a more a lively liturgy.

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