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African bishops seek help forming flourishing vocations

Barb Fraze Catholic News Service | May. 19, 2011

A catechist gives a reflection on Scripture at the diocesan center in Abuja, Nigeria, in this September 2010 file photo. A delegation from the bishops conferences of Africa, told Catholic News Service that the church in Africa is looking for help from th e U.S. in the formation of Catholic seminarians, lay people and educators. (CNS photo/Nancy Wiechec)

WASHINGTON -- Although African vocations are flourishing, the continent needs people to form those vocations, and African bishops visited Washington looking for such help.

Tanzanian Cardinal Polycarp Pengo said the major regional seminary in his city, Dar es Salaam, has 192 students and only 10 formators.

"Of course, the formation cannot be that good," the cardinal told Catholic News Service in an early May interview. "For me, this (formation) is the greatest need we have."

Cardinal Pengo, president of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar, said he would like to see U.S. seminary professors spend time teaching in Africa. He said he would like to send seminarians to the United States, where some could remain for a while after graduation while others would return to Africa to teach.

Archbishop Charles Palmer-Buckle of Accra, Ghana, added that the need for formation extended beyond priests and religious.

"When we talk about agents of evangelization, we should look at the formation of the lay leadership of the church in Africa, namely catechists, Catholic teachers, Catholic politicians, Catholic parents ... so that they also know what will be required of them, particularly formation in ... Catholic social teachings," he told CNS. The archbishop said forming lay leaders was especially important

given the growing democracy movement in Africa.

The Catholic Church needs "people who are well-qualified in politics, in economics, in finances and other professions, people who are qualified ... as teachers to be able to deliver what we call ... Catholic social teaching, the Catholic perspective."

Cardinal Pengo also emphasized the importance of Africa's Catholic universities in forming future leaders. Because they accept more than Catholic students, "differences which are at the moment pretty threatening," such as the "presence of Islamic fundamentalism ... can be ironed out through these universities."

"The entire society will be much more at peace" if people learn to live together like they do in the universities, he added.

Archbishop Palmer-Buckle recalled Pope Benedict XVI's comment that Africa was "the spiritual lungs of the world" as well as the pope's caution that Africa could suffer from the "viral infections" of materialism, atheism and relativism.

The church must know "how to form people to be able to ride what I may call the crest, the wave of huge exponential evangelization ... but at the same time how to help forestall whatever could be the pitfalls" of what the pope called "the toxic waste from the West and at the same time the fundamentalist extreme."

He said the church must move into "ongoing formation, what we call post-confirmation catechesis for various laypeople, then formation that goes into vocation, into religious life and into vocation of family life, marriage and everything." Such ongoing formation is why Catholic universities "are very, very necessary," he added.

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