

## Vocations boom in Africa

Patricia Lefevere | Sep. 26, 2011



Members of the Sisters, Home Visitors of Mary gather outside their convent on the grounds of Our Lady Queen of Nigeria Pro-Cathedral in Abuja. (Photos by Patricia Lefevere)

ABUJA, NIGERIA -- In the midst of a recession in religious vocations in Europe and North America, Africa is experiencing a vocations boom. Nigeria's nuns give every indication that religious life is important and here to stay in their nation.

When Sr. Chidalu Mbajiorgu greets new arrivals at the Pope John Paul II Pastoral Center here, her face gleams with joy and welcome. She shows guests to their modest but comfortable quarters at the center -- still under construction -- chatting with them as she helps deliver their luggage and indicating the location of the dining room, chapel and business office, which has become one of the capital's busiest Internet cafés.

Mbajiorgu is a member of the Holy Family Sisters of the Needy, an indigenous religious congregation of women founded in 1983 by Holy Ghost Fr. Denis Mary Joseph Ononuju in the Owerri archdiocese. Ononuju, now 80, has seen the order grow to 200 women, the oldest of whom is 59.

Most of the sisters are 19-30 when they enter. "It's best if they come before age 25, but exceptions are made," Mbajiorgu told *NCR*. Their work is hard and requires good physical, mental and spiritual energy, she explained.

Like many Nigerian nuns, the Holy Family Sisters of the Needy work for a salary and usually undertake professional qualifications before beginning their religious work. Teaching, nursing, and even hospitality and tourism are just some of the fields in which they labor.

"Our charism is to take care of the poor and the destitute," Mbajiorgu said. The congregation began in the southeast of Nigeria not long after the country's civil war. Its motto is "I shall gladly spend and be spent for the poor."

Among its chief works is caring for destitute girls, many of them in situations of unwanted pregnancy. The sisters run a large home for pregnant girls, aged 11-18. Many are the victims of rape, Mbajiorgu said, and some have worked as prostitutes.

These girls are bombarded with information on abortion as the only solution to their predicament. But the sisters offer a different outcome, welcoming them, providing prenatal care and acting as midwives at the time they deliver. They also instruct new mothers in how to care for their baby and how to reconcile with God and their families.



In Nigeria, parents often reject unmarried daughters for 'bringing shame

on the family,' Mbajorgu said. In school, peers make fun of them, she added. But girls who live with the sisters during their pregnancy see the sisters praying with them for reconciliation with their families.

The sisters also try to encourage the girls' talents, helping them to learn hairdressing, cooking and other skills so that they can become self-reliant and provide for their child. Many girls receive scholarships, Mbajorgu said.

The sisters sponsor St. Joseph's Home for orphans in Owerri, in Imo State. Care is extended to children who have lost one or both parents through death or whose parents are neglectful or too destitute to provide for them. Besides supplying food, shelter and medical care, the sisters also educate them to be self-supportive.

Nigeria's destitute are not always young. Many are the aged who have been neglected, abandoned in huts alongside the roads and often treated as lunatics. But the sisters have taken these seniors into their own homes and cared for them spiritually and materially.

Managing a 70-room hotel in the center of the new Nigerian capital may seem a long way from the nation's destitute, but Mbajorgu said the John Paul II Center has kept its rates low so that 'all who wish to lodge here are able to pay.' Many guests like to stay because 'it's very secure and because of our spiritual ambience,' she said, pointing to the chapel, where a sung Mass opens each day at 6:30 a.m.

One does not have to go far in Nigeria to hear songs when one sees sisters. In a chapel of a guesthouse it may be expected; in a prison it can still raise eyebrows. But that has not quieted Handmaid of the Holy Child Sr. Chikere Rita Adanma.

She regularly brings Communion and provides religious education to men and women prisoners in two jails in Abia State and Imo State, in southeastern Nigeria. Some Muslim inmates objected to her passing out papers to Christian inmates, she said. But their objections stopped after a year. 'That's because I started to sing,' said Adanma, who said the songs brought peace and calm to all and were anticipated during her visits. With that she broke into song outside the auditorium of a global conference on criminal justice that she was attending in Abuja.

Adanma, who has a diploma in social work and is studying for a master's degree in counseling, has advocated for a prison policy that would focus on strengthening young people's productivity, economic participation, self-reliance and innovation. She pointed to Nigeria's high rate of murders, rape, aggravated assault, fraud and corruption and said that victims are in need of healing and safety while offenders also need healing and rehabilitation back into society upon their release.

## Person-to-person

One of the newest orders in Nigeria is the Sisters, Home Visitors of Mary, which in June marked 10 years in Abuja with a Mass of Thanksgiving in Our Lady Queen of Nigeria Pro-Cathedral here. In 2002 Srs. Elizabeth Harris and Barbara Dakoske, both Home Visitors of Mary, arrived from Detroit at the invitation of Abuja's archbishop, John Onaiyekan.

The sisters went to Nigeria after having accepted one Nigerian novice in Michigan and discovering that other Nigerian women were interested in the congregation, drawn by its charism of person-to-person outreach. The order was started by an African-American laywoman in 1949.

Harris and Dakoske have lived in the Pro-Cathedral convent along with eight Nigerian women who are novices or have taken temporary vows. They serve as pastoral ministers in the parish of more than 11,000 families. Recently they moved to larger quarters in Abuja, combining a convent and Formation Center for their growing congregation.

"We don't own institutions, but there is a need for our sisters in schools, parishes and at the clinic" on the grounds of the Pro-Cathedral, Dakoske told *NCR*. Nigerian novices are still trained in the charism of visiting people in their homes, but also serve the church by training catechists, directing retreats, supporting and training lay leaders, and animating seminars on personal and spiritual growth. In addition, they conduct marriage preparation classes, work in day care, do HIV/AIDS counseling and testing, and run an empowerment center where women learn knitting skills as well as faith formation.

In August Srs. Clare Emeruom, Sylvia Etim and Mary Divine Igbikiowubo took final vows. Emeruom works as secretary to the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, an arm of the national bishops' conference, and Etim serves the congregation's Formation House and Mission House.

Igbikiowubo, who has studied counseling at the Catholic Institute of West Africa in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, enjoys working in a parish with women, couples and youth. "I deal with their financial, emotional and spiritual difficulties," she said.

The seven Nigerian Home Visitors of Mary who spoke with *NCR* all expressed joy in the choice they had made, even though some said they had once "run away" from a vocations call.

"Work with the sisters has brought me closer to the poor, closer to children, closer to prisoners," said Sr. Verlucia Garba, who works as a catechist in a remote village outside the capital. "My dream was to give happiness to the poor and to receive happiness from them. I am living my dream."

[Patricia Lefevere is a longtime contributor to *NCR*.]

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