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New African cardinal talks voting blocs, secret meetings, his vote

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To help Americans get a handle on Cardinal John Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria, let's set things up this way: Speaking solely about the force of his personality, there's a sense in which he's the Timothy Dolan of Africa.

Just like the always-effervescent cardinal of New York, Onaiyekan is a big, brash, smiling figure, a man who tends to dominate every room he walks into. He's quick with a laugh, he loves to press the flesh, and he clearly relishes being the center of attention.

Yet beneath all the charm, Onaiyekan is also seen as one of the leading intellectual lights among the African bishops, as well as an influential political and moral authority in his own country and beyond.

Fr. Paulinus Odozor, a Nigerian priest who teaches theology at Notre Dame, said recently that Onaiyekan "helped save democracy in Nigeria" by shaming former president Olusegun Obasanjo, a Christian, into peacefully relinquishing power in 2007 rather than jury-rigging the constitution to allow himself a third term in office.

Made a cardinal in November, Onaiyekan arrived in Rome on Monday after giving lectures in Vienna and Oslo. He sat down at the Domus Sacerdotalis for an interview with *NCR*, talking about both the looming conclave and the broader situation facing the Catholic church in Africa.

Among the highlights from the interview:

- Onaiyekan expressed a degree of frustration with some of the oratory currently being delivered in the General Congregation meetings of cardinals: "No matter how brilliant you may think your speech is, do we really need it?"
- He said there doesn't yet seem to be a consensus on how long the cardinals should wait before starting the conclave.
- He insists he doesn't yet know who will get his vote to be the next pope, and says he'll really start thinking about it only when the conclave begins.
- Onaiyekan says there is no African bloc or an African candidate, and says that so far he hasn't seen any blocs among other national groups, either.
- He insists "there's nothing to stop an African from being the pope."
- Onaiyekan says Nigerians are looking at this conclave "like the World Cup," rooting for their man to win. Even the president of Nigeria, he said, told Onaiyekan that "they should give it to us this time!"
- He said he's not terribly concerned about the next pope's ability to get control of the Vatican: "There are those who consider the running of the Roman Curia very important, but I'm more interested in how we're able to project the message of Jesus to our people," he said.
- Onaiyekan expressed support for greater roles for women in the church outside priestly ordination, and also for permitting condom use in the context of a discordant couple where one spouse is HIV-positive

and the other isn't.

The full text of the interview appears below.

How are the General Congregation meetings going?

I'm a new cardinal, and as a new person, you tend to just wait and see. Right now, I'm trying to see what's going on and where it's leading. I know from having read the procedures that these General Congregations are meant to give us the opportunity to talk and discuss among ourselves, and eventually we'll get ready for the conclave.

The one new thing in terms of the procedure is that the General Congregation now has the faculty to decide when to start the conclave. I notice some cardinals say we should not be in a hurry to start, but I'm sure there are others who feel that much of what we are hearing [in the General Congregations] is not really new. When you're in a meeting with cardinals, you're not talking to a group of seminarians. No matter how brilliant you may think your speech is, the question is, do we really need it?

We were told that several of the speeches today were on the new evangelization, and I couldn't help thinking that the Vatican just held an entire Synod of Bishops on that subject.

Exactly. I'm one of those, and there are others, who feel that we could get on with it a bit more, but this is just the first session. We've decided there will be no meetings in the evenings [Tuesday and Wednesday], and that's good so we can rest. Tomorrow night, we'll have a prayer, a holy hour.

You've never been through a conclave before --

Actually, no one has been a conclave like this before. You know, when you go to a Synod of Bishops for the first time, you look for those who have been there before. But this time, even the over-80 cardinals are saying there's something special about this *sede vacante*. It means there's something new. As a result, nobody really knows what to do. No one has gone through this kind of thing before, and it's come up more than once that we need time to really discern what exactly it means to have a conclave with a living pope.

What's your guess as to when the conclave will start?

I don't know. The constitution and *motu proprio* gives a deadline of 15-20 days [from the beginning of the *sede vacante*].

You're picking up that some cardinals might want to take most of that time?

I don't know how many. So far, I've only heard that from one person. We'll see how it works out.

As of today, have you begun thinking about who'll get your vote?

No, and I'm being very, very honest. I left home to enter the conclave, and I have deep faith that in the conclave, the Holy Spirit will speak to us. For me, all the beautiful talks we're hearing now are not really inspiring me, not telling me anything I don't already know. I see the conclave as a very special moment of grace that's not given to everybody. In this particular case, there are 115 of us who have this heavy responsibility. I also believe very firmly that whoever becomes pope, from that point on, is somebody new. He can access the special grace of God to keep him in the Petrine office.

I know the press likes to speculate about what the image of the next pope should be, but to me, I don't think that has much relevance. You know, the pope has to be a holy man, he has to fully qualified, x y and z. Then, you start looking for people. But if everybody went in with my own feeling, it's only when we're there, in a special

spiritual environment and with a heavy responsibility before God, when the inspiration will come. Somebody put it very nicely: The next pope is already chosen by the Holy Spirit, even now, and it's our job to discover him.

You've described this as a spiritual process. What do you need spiritually, when you're with your brother cardinals?

The most important thing is that we're among ourselves, and the world is out there while we finish our job. You know about retreats and so on, but this is a retreat of a very special kind. The decisions we take have to do with the very essence of God's church. If you don't believe in the Holy Spirit guiding you, then you really have no business being in the conclave. The conclave cannot be a place where there's horse-trading and lobbying. Personally, I will enter the conclave and I will simply pray.

Are you not doing any other kind of preparation, such as reading biographies of the cardinals?

There are some I know personally and others I don't know, but I can't spend my whole time reading 115 biographies. Even with those I know, I've never thought about them as prospective popes. This is the first time we're starting to look at each other that way.

Some might say this is the most momentous choice you're ever going to make, and not doing some kind of preparation is almost irresponsible.

Grace will build on nature when we're in the conclave. I'm trying to distinguish between what we're doing now, and what will happen when we're in the conclave. If we believe that the Holy Spirit will act upon the gathering of cardinals, the dynamic of the conclave is not the same as what we're experiencing now in the General Congregations. Of course, we place ourselves under canonical secrecy for the General Congregations, but that's only to protect our freedom of speech. But when we go into the conclave, we are before God, individually and together. It's a situation I've never found myself in before.

Are you saying that all the information you'll need to make an informed decision, you'll get from the conclave itself?

I believe that it will come in different ways. By the time we start casting votes, I suspect we'll see a pattern. That will lead you to take a look at people whom you may never have thought about before. Honestly, I don't know how it will work. I'm hoping that it won't take too long for us to get a two-thirds majority so I can go back home.

In the press, we often talk about voting blocs in the conclave, such as the "Italian bloc" or the "American bloc." Is there an African bloc? Do you think you'll vote as a group?

I haven't seen the Italian bloc [in the General Congregation meetings]. If they're there, I haven't seen them. I haven't seen an American bloc, or a German bloc ... I haven't seen any blocs. People are just moving around, talking with each other. There's no doubt that as Africans, we'll be talking to each other, but certainly not in terms of putting forward our own candidate. If it came to that, there are only 11 of us who are electors, so we'd be lost from the word "go." Just on the basis of democratic vote-counting, we wouldn't be the winning party.

Honestly, I don't see any blocs. During the General Congregations, however, we have talked about making sure we hear from different portions of the church. We've asked for that. We'd like to hear what the situation is in different parts of the world.

Like the continental reports at a Synod of Bishops?

Exactly. Let the Asian cardinals, for instance, tell us what the situation is in Asia, and so on.

Who's going to give these talks?

We don't know yet. Institutionally, it would make sense for the Africans if the president of SECAM, Cardinal [Polycarp] Pengo [of Tanzania], did it. Or, it could be Cardinal [Francis] Arinze, our senior cardinal, although he won't be in the conclave.

I won't ask you if you're hoping for an African pope. Instead, I'll ask: Do you think it's possible this conclave could elect an African?

It's obviously possible. Any cardinal can be pope, and theoretically, the pope could even come from outside the college. Not so long ago, people used to ask whether an African can be a priest, but we don't ask those questions anymore. There's nothing to stop an African from being the pope, nothing theologically or canonically.

What about psychologically? Is this group really prepared to elect an African?

I don't see anything psychologically to prevent it. I don't know what they're going to do, but if the Holy Spirit picks an African, they will find him.

Kofi Annan, a Ghanaian, was Secretary General of the United Nations. It was a position in which he controlled the whole bureaucracy of the U.N. Nobody was bothered by the color of his skin, or if it did, they didn't say it and it didn't stop him. I think by now, the church is truly Catholic. If we can accept a Polish pope and we can accept a German pope, without using his nationality against him, nothing should stop an African, or an Indian, or someone from China.

What are your people hoping for in this conclave?

Oh, I know what they're hoping for, because they've said it over and over again. They look at it more like the World Cup, and they want Nigeria to win. Actually, some of my closest friends and family are thinking, "Suppose it happens ... we won't see him again." As for the rest of Nigerians, they're excited about it.

If you were elected, there would be celebrations in the street, right?

I'm not really thinking about it because it's not likely to happen. But yes, I know they would be extremely excited. Even the president of Nigeria told me when I spoke to him, "They should give it to us this time." My Muslim friends say the same thing. They all say, "We are voting for you," and I have to tell them they're not voting!

Have you thought about what qualities you think the next pope should have?

First of all, this isn't the kind of role you take because you're fully qualified for it.

Because nobody is ever fully qualified?

Exactly. It's not like we're looking at résumés to see if somebody measures up.

You're not hiring a CEO?

Exactly. Rather than this being a hiring process, we have to believe the Holy Spirit is guiding the church. Of course, every pope must be pious; every pope has to have confidence, both in himself and in the church.

Obviously, a pope must be able to keep the church together in fidelity to the Gospel. Those things are true of every bishop, too.

Let me ask about a couple of specific qualities other cardinals have cited. First, is it important that the next pope be an evangelizer?

Every pope has to evangelize, but they all do it in different ways. When the pope comes, we will see who he is, and we will see how he exercises his office on the basis of whatever special gifts God gives him. Maybe, for instance, he'll be excellent with the media. I don't think anybody knew John Paul was so good with media before he was elected. It was only after he became pope that it was discovered. We already knew Benedict XVI was a theologian, but he went on beyond theology into economics and finance. We have to believe that just as popes come and go, whoever is pope will be the right man for the times we are living in. These times are very complex, and the problems of Europe and not the same as the problems of Nigeria.

Talk about that a little bit.

The things that people consider important here are not the most important things for the church in my country. I hear a lot about the so-called de-Christianization of the West, and the rather cynical attitude of the media toward the church. We don't have that in my country. On the other hand, they don't have to deal with a strong Muslim group here, while we have to figure out how to live in peace with people of other faiths. The whole question of good governance and social justice looms large for us, but not so much here. Whoever the pope is has to take all that into account. Actually, the job of being pope is almost superhuman.

You mention good governance. There are a lot of cardinals who have been talking about the need for good governance here in the Vatican, by which they mean there's a perception that business management here hasn't always been handled well over the last eight years. They're hoping the next pope will have the capacity to govern effectively. Would you agree that's an important consideration?

What I can say is that those who are talking this way are probably those who have regular contact with the Roman Curia, but the Curia is just a small little minority of the whole church of God. We in Nigeria don't know what's happening in the Roman Curia, so I can't say whether it's running well or not. Even the case of the butler, who took papers off the desk of the pope, for me is not a big deal. There are those who consider the running of the Roman Curia very important, but I'm more interested in how we're able to project the message of Jesus to our people. Not only Catholics, but everybody ... those are the issues I'm looking at.

Many Africans are concerned about the status and role of women in African culture. What should the next pope do about the role of women?

First of all, I would say that denying the differences between men and women is not a progressive position. I don't think you move humanity forward by denying the difference between male and female. To put that into theological terms, the Scriptures tell us that God made man in his own image and likeness, creating them male and female. The image of God in human beings in expressed in terms of being either male or female. The distinction, the difference, must be respected, but both male are female are the image of God and so the dignity is the same.

When it comes to the church, the only thing I can see that's problematic is the priesthood, to which women aren't eligible. Of course, a lot of other things follow from that ... if you can't be a priest, you can't be a bishop, you can't lead a diocese, you can't become a cardinal, and so on. Beyond that, however, there's a whole range of possibilities of recognizing the role of women that has not been sufficiently explored. That story hasn't ended yet, as far as I am concerned.

What are some of those possibilities?

Women can do everything in the church, except for those things reserved to a priest. For instance, there are now a couple of women at the level of secretaries in the Roman Curia. Even if it's just one [or] two, it means it can happen. However, you can't resolve the whole matter simply by bringing more women into the Curia. In the parishes, in the dioceses, there are so many things women can do that aren't being pushed.

In the case of Africa, the problem sometimes doesn't come from the priests but from the women themselves. For example, our rules allow women to distribute Communion, and for you in America, this is old hat. It's still a problem in many of our countries, however, to get the congregation to accept that a woman can do it. There are many who refuse to go to women for Communion, including other women. They say it's not appropriate. Incidentally, Anglicans and Methodists have women all over the world have women who have been ordained as minister, but not in Nigeria. The Anglicans and Methodists in my country have no women in ministry.

So it's also a cultural problem?

Yes, it's cultural.

Where do things stand regarding HIV/AIDS?

Thanks be to God, we have overcome a lot of the problems we used to grapple with. Our people know much more about what HIV/AIDS is and what can cause it. We're more familiar now with the importance but also the limits of condoms. At one time, people didn't even want to consider the limits of condoms as a way of protection against HIV/AIDS. Now it's been acknowledged scientifically that there's a limit to how much you can rely on condoms to stem the tide. I think the position of the church is no longer considered quite so obsolete as people sometimes thought.

Above all, we have to acknowledge the record of the church and church-affiliated agencies in looking after people with HIV/AIDS. There aren't so many people stepping up to do that. It's much easier to get money to buy condoms and distribute them, than to sit at the bedside of a dying AIDS patient.

On a more positive level, we've done some great work on prevention. The impact of good education, which reaches the grassroots, is often underestimated. The church has tried to bring information about HIV/AIDS, such as how it's spread and how it isn't, down to the grassroots. We've made an impact that governments can't. For instance, we've taught people that you can't get HIV/AIDS by shaking hands. It may seem obvious, but it was a major eye-opener for the people. You don't get HIV/AIDS by sitting at the same table, by eating from the same plate, or using the same toilets. These were all important myths.

What's been the effect of that education?

Before, people were ostracized, and that killed many people. In Africa, when you're on your own, you're dead. When you come to a gathering and sit down and everybody else gets up and moves away, you're finished. In the early days, many people died because of this. We also have to recognize that at the beginning, many leaders, including religious leaders, were responsible for that stigma. Now we've gone back and reframed the message, telling people that HIV/AIDS patients simply have a disease and need care.

My own personal experience is that what affected me the most is when we have children with HIV/AIDS. The old idea that AIDS is God's punishment on reckless people just doesn't work. I look at the child and say, "Tell me, what sin did he commit? Is he reckless?" Once you're able to present that, it changes people. It's not as frightful as before. Also, people know that HIV/AIDS is not a death sentence. With treatment, something can be

done about it.

What about the debate over the church and condoms?

People don't always get the church's position clearly. We have to distinguish between using a condom in the context of HIV/AIDS and condoms as contraceptives. Very often, that distinction is not made. A condom is a piece of rubber, and it has no absolute moral value. It depends on what you use it for.

When we discourage the distribution of condoms to young persons, it's not only about HIV/AIDS, but about sexual behavior. With or without condoms, young people should not be sleeping around. Of course, we know some of them will, just as we know that some people will be thieves, but we still preach it. I tell people in church that if you're not married, you have no business sleeping around. If you want to avoid HIV/AIDS, it's better not to sleep around. It has been proven that a condom is not 100 percent secure, so you always run a risk. What's beyond all reasonable doubt is that no one has ever died of abstinence, so why don't you give it a try?

I am one of those who believe that with a discordant couple [a couple in which one spouse is HIV-positive and the other isn't], who have not only the right but in some circumstances even a sort of duty for sexual activity, if a condom will protect the spouse, I see no problem with it.

That, of course, is an open question not settled definitively by Rome.

It hasn't been settled, and that's why this is my own position. I believe this situation is different than the reason for which *Humanae Vitae* condemned artificial contraception. To cite *Humanae Vitae* in this case, I think, is inappropriate.

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