

# Why is Catholicism so vibrant in Africa?



I feel safe in making this statement. Not many American Catholics will be utterly fascinated by Pope Francis' recent visit to three African nations: the islands of Mauritius and Madagascar in the Indian Ocean, and Mozambique in East Africa.

Nevertheless, the pope's journey to the region, his interest in the region and the similar interests shared by his most immediate predecessors – Popes St. Paul VI, St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI – indicates how important Africa has become to the Catholic Church, and what Africa will mean for the Church in the foreseeable future.

Some studies suggest that before long the Catholic population of sub-Saharan Africa, east and west, will account for as many as 40%, or even more, of the number of people in the world who identify themselves as Catholics.

In the lifetime of many Americans today, Catholics in each of two African nations – the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Nigeria – will outnumber Catholics in the United States. They also will far outnumber European Catholics. These are well-founded predictions. Something could change this forecast, but that seems unlikely.

Numbers can be analyzed in many ways, but experts note the factors behind the numbers when it comes to Catholicism in Africa. People familiar with the Church in Africa speak of the widespread enthusiasm, and indeed excitement, about the Church among Catholic Africans.

A person recently moaned to me about the slippage in regular Mass attendance in this country and the drought in vocations.

This person had a point. Regular Mass attendance on weekends quickly is becoming the exception, rather than the rule, in this country. Nuns are few and becoming fewer. Seminarians are not many, compared to the past.

This same person opined that celibacy has caused this decline in vocations to the priesthood, and if the pope and bishops had any sense, they would end mandatory celibacy for priests tomorrow.

I simply asked, what about Africa? Celibacy is required there, and they do not have enough seminaries despite the flood of vocations. (We see a sign of this phenomenon in this country: African priests are serving in almost every diocese in the United States, because they are sent here as missionaries!)

In many places in Africa, Catholicism came onto the scene centuries ago. Speaking of the places where the pope recently visited, Madagascar was a French colony for hundreds of years, and everywhere the French went, they took with them the Catholic Church, such as in Louisiana in this country. The French were also in Mauritius for generations. Mozambique was a Portuguese colony, and wherever the Portuguese were, so was the Catholic Church.

It was not a story without its dark side, but with the French and Portuguese Catholics came schools, hospitals and social services along with the religion itself.

Few of these European masters left the colonies against protests from the natives, however. To make Catholicism truly a part of the African heart, not a hand-me-down from former colonial times, Pope St. Paul VI made moves that were providential.

By appointing natives as bishops, by encouraging native vocations, by stimulating native lay involvement in the Church and by bringing Africans in the highest circles of leadership in the universal Church, he made Catholicism African for the

Africans. He laid the cornerstone for what is happening now. His successors followed in his footprints.

It is all wonderful news. Thank God for it, but look at American Catholicism and compare.

Ask hard questions. Be honest. Why is regular Mass attendance declining here? Why are vocations dwindling? Where is the strength in conviction and boldness in Catholic action once so majestic in this country?

Clergy sex abuse has disillusioned many American Catholics, but we were tumbling downhill well before the scandal. What is wrong with us?

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