News



Elizabeth Muturi, center, dances during an Aug. 11 Swahili Mass at St. Andrew's Catholic Church in Edmonton, Alberta. (CNS/Grandin Media/Lincoln Ho)

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As the sound of drums, tambourines and Swahili hymns reverberated through St. Andrew's Church, Elizabeth Muturi and fellow parishioners swayed their arms and hips, dancing down the aisle with the Book of Gospels raised behind them.

For Muturi, who grew up attending Mass in Kenya, the sight and sounds were a dream come true.

"It's so touching to see this come to fruition," she said. "Even to see our priest willing to learn to some Swahili — it is exciting. I have to thank God, because it's all by the power of the Holy Spirit."

A Mass that incorporated the Swahili language and African Catholic customs was celebrated for the first time at the north Edmonton parish Aug. 11. Muturi initiated the effort, and her prayer was that the Mass would bring many souls back to the church.

"The way we celebrate the Mass back home is full of life — you can sing, scream, clap your hands, you can freely be yourself and praise God," she said. "And I have to be honest, many people have told me that they stopped going to the Catholic Church after moving to Canada because they felt bored.

"But I left Africa and came to Canada and I did not change my faith. It's been my prayer for a long time that it will be the same for others. Because a lot of souls are running away, not just with Africans but with many other people.

"Even if it's only once a month, I know we can grab certain souls with this Mass and bring them back to church."

While the first Swahili Mass at St. Andrew's drew fewer than 50 people, Muturi said it also attracted many choir members who had been away from the Catholic Church for many years. Swahili is spoken in African countries such as Rwanda, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and parts of Zimbabwe and Congo.

The Mass brought a new level of vibrancy and excitement to St. Andrew's. Some parishioners arrived in colorful traditional African wear. The sounds of thumping drums and loud, passionate voices accompanied all the hymns and sung parts of the liturgy. In addition to the bread and wine, the offertory procession featured dances and gifts of pineapples, bananas and other fruits.

As word spreads, Muturi hopes the Mass will become even bigger, louder and livelier.

"We want all people from Africa to come here, because this is how we connect with God," said Muturi. "We always say if you don't sing for God, the birds will do it.

"We reinforce that a lot back home, and I think as more people hear about this Mass, it will be even more full of life."

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Aside from the music, the Mass was celebrated in English. But even St. Andrew's pastor, Polish-born Fr. Andrew Bogdanowicz, decided to learn at least some Swahili for the occasion. He spoke the Sign of the Cross and "The Lord be with you" in Swahili and said he plans to learn more for future Masses.

Bogdanowicz felt it was important to learn these words and reinforce the universal nature of the Catholic faith.

"It emphasizes that we are an international church and that the church values their traditions, language and culture," he said. "We can adopt and use their talents to worship God and fulfill our mission to evangelize the world.

"Swahili is also a very phonetic language like my native language of Polish, so I felt OK in being bold enough to learn it."

Muturi got permission from Bogdanowicz and the Archdiocese of Edmonton to organize the Swahili Mass, and news of it spread largely through word of mouth.

When Thomas Ngobe, originally from Kenya, heard about it, he immediately told his family members and asked to practice with the choir. Ngobe has lived in Edmonton for the past five years, and it was his first time attending a Mass in Swahili since moving to the city.

"It's glorious; it's heavenly," Ngobe said with a contented smile afterward. "This really celebrates our diversity and brings us all together, because we are all brought together by Jesus Christ. We are his creation, and we come together to celebrate and glorify the Lord.

"Whether it's once a month, twice a month or every Sunday — I will be here."



The offertory procession for the first Swahili Mass at St. Andrew's Catholic Church in Edmonton, Alberta, Aug. 11, featured gifts of pineapples, bananas and other fruits. (CNS/Grandin Media/Lincoln Ho)

Nancy Kirugi lives on the south side of Edmonton, a considerable distance from St. Andrew's. But she said as long as the Swahili Mass is celebrated, she will gladly make the long drive and make St. Andrew's her home parish.

Kirugi had come to St. Andrews for a social function a few weeks earlier and overheard a conversation about the Mass. It was her first chance to attend a Swahili Mass since moving to Canada 10 years ago.

"It brought me back to my roots," she said. "What stands out to me about this Mass is its animation. When we sing, we feel like we are in the Holy Spirit. We really express our joy and become a part of the celebration.

"I hope this can continue to the point where we have it every Sunday."

The next Swahili Mass is scheduled for Sept. 1. Muturi has asked Fr. Joseph Kiragu, a Kenyan priest who is a distant relative, to celebrate the Mass entirely in Swahili on that Sunday. Kiragu currently resides in the United States but will be visiting Edmonton for the occasion. Because of this, Muturi hopes the Mass will be particularly crowded and energetic.

As she continued to spread the word, Muturi stressed that her passion is based in her love of God, love of the Catholic faith, and a hope of spreading that faith to other African Catholics in the Edmonton area.

"This is about bringing souls back to the church, nothing more and nothing less," she said. "I may have left, too, if I was not strong enough in my faith. But all of my ancestors have been Catholic; it's not something I can just drop.

"I persevere because of the Holy Spirit — that's what's kept me a strong Catholic."

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