Opinion
Guest Voices



Pope Leo XIV is cheered by faithful while visiting a nursing home in Saurimo, Angola, April 20, 2026. (AP/Andrew Medichini)



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During his recent visit to Africa, Pope Leo XIV was encouraging to a continent where religion, family and community are still vital in the lives of people. But he was also challenging, especially to the ruling elites whose corruption and infighting are keeping the continent from reaching its true potential.

Much media attention has focused on the African church's opposition to LGBTQ rights in their countries and the blessing of gay couples in the church. Leo said he believes there are more pressing moral issues to be addressed, like "justice, equality and freedom."

It was not long ago that the West treated LGBTQ people very badly. It took us time to change. Still, it is shocking to see African bishops support the criminalization of gays and, in some cases, even executions. Similar positions have been taken by other Christian churches and imams in Africa.

African bishops also need to recognize that Europe's desire to be pastoral and welcoming to gays is not that different from their desire to be pastoral and welcoming to Africans in polygamous relationships. Both groups are violating church teaching, but are there ways of including them in the religious community?

Many Catholic commentators have pointed to Africa as the future of the Catholic Church. They say the U.S. church is in decline, the Latin American church is losing out to evangelicals and Pentecostals, and the European church is on life support. In

Africa, however, the Catholic population continues to grow. Church attendance in the West has declined, while church services in Africa are crowded and lively.

Africa is full of vocations, while in the West, there are few. Africans have become missionaries to the West.

I too mourn the decline of Western Catholicism, but as a social scientist, I am cautious about declaring that Africa is the future of the church. The African church may simply be repeating the same pattern that played out in the West.

Centuries ago, Catholicism converted European tribes from their indigenous religions to Christianity. The same occurred in Africa over the last couple of centuries. Today, however, there are fewer conversions to Catholicism because most people in Africa are either Christian or Muslim. There are few conversions from Islam, and evangelicals and Pentecostals are doing quite well.

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Catholicism is growing in Africa not through conversions but because African Catholics are still having large families. But we know that birth rates fall when people move into cities and when women become educated. This will happen with Catholic families in Africa just as it has happened elsewhere in the world.

Church attendance also falls when people move away from their families and places of birth, where social pressure supports religious practice. And while in small towns the church historically has been the most important social institution, in urban areas it must compete with secular entertainment and activities.

There is no reason that the African church will be immune from the same pressures that impacted the church in the West, especially given the ubiquity of social media and internet access.

Likewise, there is no reason to think that vocations will continue at high rates when family size shrinks. Parents prefer grandchildren to having an only son become a priest.

Financial and sex scandals have also hurt the church in the West, and there are indications that Africa also has these problems. Clericalism and patriarchy are also

rampant in Africa when priests see themselves as comparable to tribal chiefs. As the laity becomes educated, clericalism and patriarchy become less tolerated.

I hope I am wrong, but I think that the church in Africa will look very much like the church in the West by the end of this century. Africa should learn from our experience. If we do not figure out how to save the church in the West, the church in Africa will face the same decline.

I would therefore argue that the church in the West, not Africa, is the future of the church, and we better learn to deal with it.

There is one mistake that the church in Europe made that the church in Africa (like the church in the United States) avoided.

In Europe, the church hierarchy took the side of kings and the nobility against the interests of the common people. It opposed democracy, human rights and labor unions until the end of the 19th century. Even in the 20th century, the church tended to align itself with conservative political parties, which led to anticlericalism among the supporters of other political parties.

The African bishops have, for the most part, taken the side of the people in support of democracy and human rights. They have opposed tribalism and the use of violence to resolve disputes. They favor using a country's resources to enrich the entire country and not just a few families. They have opposed corruption and called for transparency in governance. They have avoided endorsing political parties.

The church has also embraced ecumenism and interreligious cooperation, although in some countries this is difficult. I fear that Africa may repeat the wars between Christians and Muslims that ravaged Europe in the past.

Because of its support for democracy, justice and reconciliation, in many African countries, the church is the most respected and trusted institution.

If Africa can get its act together, it could be the most important continent by the end of the 21st century. It has a young and vibrant population, which together with its natural resources are the foundations for industry. Cheap solar and wind energy can power industry in a way that is not dependent on outsiders.

But this can only happen if Africa turns away from corruption, tribalism and civil strife. This will require a spiritual as well as a political conversion. The African church

can play an important role in this conversion by supporting democracy, justice and peace. In his visit to Africa, Leo endorsed this vision of the church. Let us pray that it is a success.

This story appears in the **Leo XIV in North and Central Africa** feature series. View the full series.