

## Botswana, where African stereotypes go to die

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 11, 2009 NCR Today

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*Rome*

Over and over during the first week of the Synod for Africa, speakers have stressed the diversity of situations across the continent — the contrast between the Muslim-dominated north and sub-Saharan Africa, for example, or between war-torn Congo and Sudan and zones of relative calm such as Gambia.

Nowhere do generalizations about Africa go to die as readily, however, as in Botswana.

A landlocked nation of two million in southern Africa, Botswana has long been hailed as an African success story. (Americans may be most familiar with Botswana as the setting for the novels, and now the HBO television series, *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*.)

One of the most impoverished nations in Africa at the time of its independence in 1966, Botswana today boasts a stable political system and a rapidly developing market economy.

More than sixty percent of Botswana's population lives above the poverty line, an astonishing achievement by regional standards, with an estimated per-capita Gross Domestic Product of almost \$15,000. For the past thirty years, Botswana has enjoyed an annual rate of growth averaging nine percent, outpacing even the legendary *Asian tigers*, and giving the country a standard of living today comparable to Turkey.

During Pope Benedict XVI's trip to Cameroon and Angola last March, my wife and I dined with a famed Cameroonian journalist, Charlie Ndi Chia, who touted Botswana as an African model. He offered a succinct explanation for its success: *Very little corruption.*

The distinctiveness of Botswana was brought home in resounding fashion on Friday morning, Oct. 9, when Bishop Franklyn Nubuasah, the apostolic vicar of Francistown in Botswana, talked about the challenges of immigration.

While the plight of African migrants been a theme throughout the synod, Nubuasah's approach was strikingly different: His country isn't generating immigrants, he said, it's struggling to accommodate them.

If you closed your eyes, you might have thought you were hearing a bishop from Cologne, or Brussels, or Chicago, or any other spot in the West that acts as a magnet for migrants seeking a better life.

*Botswana is a small stable democratic country with good governance and the rule of law,* Nubuasah said. *We are a middle income country that attracts people from other places of Africa.*

*Right now, there is a strain on our resources, job market and health facilities because of the influx of people due to the socio-political situation of the region,* Nubuasah said. *We are concerned about xenophobia due to the present harsh economic downturn.*

To put that point in slightly different language, Nubuasah was saying that the major pastoral challenge in Botswana isn't so much to comfort the afflicted, but rather to persuade people who are fairly comfortable not to pull the ladder up behind them.

Even with HIV/AIDS, Nubuasah suggested that the realities in Botswana are more akin to the developed world -- perhaps especially to the United States, and its own current debate over whether health care reform ought to include immigrants.

"Treatment [meaning anti-retroviral medication] is available for citizens, but unfortunately not for refugees and foreigners living in the country," he said.

Nubuasah closed by proposing that his country as a model: "The church in Africa can learn from the experiences of Botswana to promote peace," he said.

Whether or not the "Botswana miracle" can be readily exported to other parts of Africa remains to be seen, but at the very least, the country offers an object lesson in the dangers of painting with too broad a brush -- a lesson relevant as the Synod for Africa moves into its recommendations-making stage.

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