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Project Africa: Exploring the growing church

by Christina S.N. Lewis

Africa has come into new prominence in the church and wider world community. The October 2009 Synod on Africa held at the Vatican brought to greater awareness story after story of churches rich in spirit and poor in resources. Catholicism on the African continent, meanwhile, has witnessed some of the fastest conversion growth in world.

Consequently, it is the youngest, and, in the eyes of some, the most dynamic locus of Catholic life today. Sub-Saharan Africa records some 800 million people, 130 million of these are Catholic. Consider this: During the twentieth century, the Catholic population of sub-Saharan Africa exploded from 1.9 million to more than 130 million people.

Pope Benedict XVI visited the sub-continent in 2009 and will visit again in 2011.

The continent suffers from many problems: weak and corrupt governments, poor infrastructure, internecine war and the scourge of AIDS that killed some 1.3 million sub-Saharan Africans in 2009. In South Africa roughly 18 percent of the population is HIV-positive, according to UK-based Averting HIV & AIDS.

Catholic-affiliated charities and ministers are at the forefront of on-the-ground aid in Africa. In some countries, Catholic charities provide the majority of HIV and AIDS healthcare. In many others, Catholic schools are the best educational option.

Across the sub-continent women religious, in both local and international orders, have thrown themselves into pastoral work, leaving the sanctity of hospitals or schools to directly serve the poor, sick and oppressed. Many focus on improving the rights of women, others focus on HIV and AIDS treatment or anti-poverty work. Yet these women have received scant attention in the media.

In the weeks ahead, among other reporting, NCR hopes to shed some light on the work of these women. We plan to share with readers news from this vibrant and struggling part of the world.

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Who is Christina Lewis?

Africa: A Reporter's Notebook

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