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African sisters journey to US for education, mission

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Sr. Gisella Chinguile

When Sr. Gisella Chinguile walked onstage to receive her diploma from Marymount University in Arlington, Va., in May, wearing a cap and gown on top of her pale blue habit, she could barely contain her delight. "I was so excited I remember I did a dance," she said, and everyone applauded.

For Chinguile, a member of the Benedictine Sisters of Our Lady Help of Christians in Tanzania, the graduation ceremony marked the end of a process begun nearly seven years earlier. After arriving in Virginia in late 2005, she spent a couple of years studying English at a community college before enrolling at Marymount to pursue a degree in liberal studies. As she was preparing to return to Africa -- first for a brief visit with her community, then on to Uganda to earn a master's degree in English -- she said she feels sad to leave the Benedictine Sisters in Bristow, Va., who have become like a second family.

"They did a lot, I cannot even mention," she said. "I feel so spoiled here."

Chinguile, who is 46, said she realized she wanted to become a nun at the age of 9, when she saw a sister dressed in a white habit during Sunday Mass. She entered her community at 17, and worked for some time as a housekeeper in the bishop's residence before coming to the U.S. When she returns to her community in southern Tanzania, she said, she wants to become a teacher and share all she has learned.

The story Chinguile tells is probably not unlike that of many other nuns who come here from Africa, where vocations have grown rapidly in the last few decades. They arrive in major cities or in rural pockets of the country to attend Catholic schools and study subjects such as nursing, English or canon law so that they can take the practical skills back home and train others. Many, like Chinguile, receive full scholarships and live rent-free with neighboring religious orders, while others struggle on their own.

But, apart from the occasional story in a local publication or a mention in the newsletter of a religious community, the sisters' journeys to the U.S. and back seem to unfold quietly, below the radar of any institution that tracks the workings of the Catholic church.

Diocesan officials estimate that sisters from Africa (and other developing regions) have been filtering in and out

of the U.S. to study -- and also to work -- with some regularity for least 20 years. But there is apparently no record of how many sisters have been here and gone back, and how many are here now. (The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Office of Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations said it has no research on the subject; however, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University does plan to release a study on international priests sometime in the next year.)

"Africa really is the emerging church right now," said Sheila McLaughlin, an oblate with the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, Pa., who manages the U.S. office of the Alliance for International Monasticism. She said, "A lot of the communities in Africa are drawing a lot of women who do not have their secondary education."

The national branch of the organization, which includes most Benedictine orders in the U.S. and Canada, was founded in the 1970s to assist communities in Africa, Asia and Latin America with their educational and formation needs. McLaughlin said that for the past 12 years the organization has been sending a couple of sisters every year to communities in Africa to help in various ways -- a canon lawyer recently helped one community in Namibia draft its constitution -- but the program is on hold for the time being as the group evaluates its work.

Meanwhile, diocesan officials in Chicago and New York say nuns from Africa keep arriving, but in smaller numbers than a few years ago -- a change they attribute to a slow economy.

Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Sr. Joan McGlinchey, who is vicar for religious at the Chicago archdiocese, said she knows of about 30 nuns from Africa in the archdiocese, who are either students or missionaries. In her work over the past 20 years, she said, she has noticed three common situations: Some of the sisters come here to stay with a sponsoring community and are studying while doing mission work, others come on their own to study (this is a group that sometimes ends up struggling), and others come as missionaries, in what has been described as a "reverse evangelization."

"They're a young church and have abundant vocations," McGlinchey said of the church in Africa. "We went to evangelize them years ago, as missionaries, and now they're coming back to help us."

But for some, life in the U.S. is not what they imagined.

Students -- particularly if they come here without the support of a local community -- sometimes don't have enough money for rent or other living expenses, their scholarships may not cover tuition, and their immigration status makes it difficult to find a job, McGlinchey said. Some of them experience racism for the first time in their lives.

Charity Sr. Maryann Seton Lopiccolo, episcopal delegate for religious in the Brooklyn, N.Y., diocese, said integration into American culture is another challenge.

"It's a whole way of American behavior, responsibilities," she said. "The structure of the church is different."

The culture shock can test a sister's vocation, Lopiccolo said, which is why communities often send to the U.S. nuns who are older and have made their final profession.

"To send someone away from the mother community at too young an age is a hazard," she said. "Sometimes it's too much."

She counted no more than a handful of nuns from Africa that she knows about, who are currently staying with communities in Brooklyn or Queens (the borough of Queens is part of the Brooklyn diocese).

Elsewhere in the country, nuns from Africa are completing degrees in education, theology, canon law, English and psychology, among other subjects, while living with the following communities *NCR* contacted after a brief search: In St. Leo, Fla., two nuns from Tanzania are staying with a community of Benedictine sisters; in Atchison, Kan., two nuns from Tanzania are also living with a community of Benedictine sisters; in Scranton, Pa., at least four nuns (two from Kenya and two from Tanzania) are living at the house of the Congregation of Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary; and in Milwaukee, two sisters from Nigeria live with the School Sisters of Notre Dame.

According to a recent newsletter of the Franciscan Common Venture, a partnership between three Franciscan communities in the United States and one in Cameroon, there are four members of the Tertiary Sisters of St. Francis, of Bamenda, Cameroon, studying in the U.S.

The sisters "are making wonderful progress on their degree programs," the winter 2012 newsletter says. One was preparing to defend her doctoral dissertation and considering possible internships, another hoped to get the course work needed to finish her master's degree, and two were looking forward to graduation in May.

So far, the total number of African nuns here is anybody's guess.

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