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Two parallels for understanding the 'powerhouse' church in Nigeria

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tI?m in Nigeria this week because I?m convinced that the 21st century is likely to be an ?African century? in Catholicism, and I wanted to find out what makes one of the powerhouse churches of the continent tick.

In the 20th century, Africa went from a Catholic population of 1.9 million in 1900 to 130 million in 2000, a staggering growth rate of 6,708 percent. Half of all adult baptisms in the world, the surest sign of missionary expansion, are in Africa. Inexorably, pastoral and intellectual energy in the church will follow population, and this means that African leaders are destined to play an increasingly important role. Nigeria will have 47 million Catholics by 2050, and has the human capital and ecclesiastical infrastructure to become an African 'voice' in the global church.

This week, I?ve spoken at length with a half-dozen Nigerian priests, several bishops, and many Nigerian laity. I?ve taken part in liturgies and visited Catholic parishes, seminaries and schools. I?ve spoken to political and diplomatic figures about their impressions of the church. On the basis of that experience, two historical comparisons seem to best express the spirit of this growing, dynamic, fascinating church: pre-Vatican II American Catholicism, and English Catholicism in the 14th century.

The first image comes from an American priest who grew up in the pre-conciliar church in the United States, and who has served in various capacities in Nigeria for more than two decades.

Read more about Allen's trip to Nigeria in his weekly column for March 9: In Nigeria, Christians and Muslims in uneasy calm [1].

?Seminaries here are full, and vocations to the religious life are booming,? he said. ?Parishes are very strong. Catholic spirituality here is very devotional, with lots of pious leagues and societies. The leadership model is very clerical, very authoritarian, with priests placed on a pedestal. Theologically, the church here is conservative, with no one really chafing against Rome or established church teachings.?

This American is, in his own words, ?somewhat liberal? on church matters, and said at first he was frustrated with the Nigerian ethos. Over time, he said, he?s come to see that it works for Nigeria.

?For one thing, the issues that have split the church elsewhere ? sex and authority ? aren?t really burning concerns here,? he said. ?African culture is fairly authoritarian, and the word of a ?big man? counts a great deal. Plus, Africans generally are pretty conservative on sexual morality ? abortion, divorce, homosexuality, are all taboo.? In that sense, he said, Catholic teaching doesn?t cut against the cultural grain the way it does in some circles in the north.

Further, he said, Nigerian Catholics seem to want a strong sense of identity, especially to distinguish themselves from their Muslim and Pentecostal neighbors. Internal unity is more important, since they sometimes feel ?under siege? from the outside.

Fundamentally, this priest said, Nigerian Catholics seem content with their church as it is, so he?s adopted a position of, ?Who am I to judge??

The other historical parallel, to 14th century England, comes from a senior Western diplomat who served in Nigeria in the 1980s, and then was posted here again several years ago. He said it?s impossible to understand any kind of Nigerian Christianity, Catholicism included, without recognizing the powerful hold of African traditional religion on the popular mind.

?This is true of both Christianity and Islam in equal measure,? he said. ?Both incorporate huge amounts of indigenous religion all the way up the line ? magic, charms, spells, and witchcraft,? he said.

The diplomat cited the recent case of an elderly woman beheaded in southern Nigeria after being branded a witch, an act that triggered a spate of violence between rival tribes that left 80 dead. He said that even sophisticated, cosmopolitan Nigerians often still feel dread when confronted with traditional masks that are believed to represent various evil spirits.

?Non-belief hardly exists here,? he said, ?and the mental furniture of all the ?imported? religions borrows heavily from the traditional ones.?

Catholics, for example, might pray to the Virgin Mary to protect them from witchcraft, or spend time before the Blessed Sacrament in part to repel demonic forces. Thus the comparison to 14th century England, when Catholics first thing in the morning would recite the opening of the Gospel of John because doing so was believed to ward off evil.

?To grasp Nigerian religiosity, you have to put yourself in a mental world where the borders between Christianity and pre-modern folk religion are still very fluid, and the two penetrate one another,? he said.

The diplomat added that this perspective helps explain the phenomenal growth of Pentecostalism in Nigeria and across much of Africa, because it makes battling the demonic, and exalting the miraculous, an explicit part of its appeal.

Granted, both of these historical comparisons come from outsiders, but they seem to track in many ways with what Nigerians themselves have said over the course of this week. Perhaps neither is, by itself, the key that unlocks the heart of Nigerian Catholicism, but both offer a useful ?lens? through which to see the reality.

On the basis of my experience this week, one thing seems clear to me: This beautiful, fascinating country ? with such striking contrasts between its material and human potential, and its uneven economic and political realities ? is destined to be a key point of reference in the church of the future. For that reason alone, it?s worth keeping an eye on Nigeria.

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[1] http://ncrcafe.org/node/966