

REMARKS OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
“SHARING OUR STORY: THE CONTRIBUTION OF AFRICAN PRIESTS AND RELIGIOUS IN THE UNITED STATES”
20TH ANNUAL CONVENTION OF THE AFRICAN CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC CLERGY AND RELIGIOUS IN THE UNITED STATES (ACCCRUS)
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My Dear Friends in Christ,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy Father’s representative to the United States, I greet you in his name and express the closeness of Pope Francis as you gather for these days of prayer and reflection on the contribution of African Priests and Religious to the life of the Church in the United States. I am grateful for the invitation of your President, Father Henry Atem, and for the efforts of all who have contributed to the planning of this twentieth annual convention of the African Conference of Catholic Clergy and Religious in the United States.

In the three years since my appointment as Nuncio, I have traveled extensively around the United States, and I could not help but notice that the number of African priests serving here is huge. It is clear to me that African clergy and religious are a vital part to the work of evangelization in the United States. Having spent many years in Africa, as a child in Madagascar and later in diplomatic missions in Zimbabwe and Mozambique, as well as serving as Nuncio in Uganda, it brings me great joy to see the Church in Africa grow and begin to send missionaries of its own.

I arrived as a small child in Madagascar in 1949. The Church there was clearly a missionary Church, served by French bishops and priests. Their missionary zeal and dedication inspired me, and undoubtedly inspired some of the clergy and catechists who handed on the faith to you. Many of you are the living fruit of their labors. Your catechists and formators were educated by the missionaries. You are their gift to the Church in Africa, but the Church in Africa is not selfish with her gifts; rather, she is generous, and you have been offered for service to the Church in the United States.

It is amazing to me how in the span of my lifetime, the situation of the Church has changed. On May 25, 1939, Pius XII consecrated Father Joseph Kiwanuka as Bishop of Masaka in Uganda. He was the first “modern” African bishop, and he took as his episcopal motto: “Monstra Te Esse Matrem”, “Demonstrate your Motherhood.”

The Church in Africa has been demonstrating its motherhood. Now there are more than 200 million Catholics on the African continent. Nearly all the bishops and priests are indigenous. The Church there has received a tremendous heritage from the missionaries but also from the martyrs and those who suffered in receiving and handing on the faith. Each of us must ask: “What have I done with this heritage in a changing world?”

This world is changing. Those countries with previously Christian roots, who generously sent missionaries, are unable to provide sufficient clergy. When I return to France, there are African clergy everywhere. Here in the United States, that is the case. A recent study from CARA also showed that 3% of those ordained in the United States in 2019 were born in Nigeria. Only Mexico (5%) had a higher percentage; and, that’s just Nigeria. The Church in Africa is sending missionaries.

Ten years ago, the Synod on Africa was held. In his post-Synodal exhortation *Africae Munus*, Pope Benedict XVI spoke of “Africa’s commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ” as a “precious treasure.” Concerned about evangelization and the new evangelization, he wrote:

The pilgrim Church in Africa is also called to contribute to the new evangelization in secularized countries which once provided numerous missionaries but today are sadly lacking in vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life. In the meantime, great numbers of African men and women have accepted the invitation of the Lord of the harvest to work in his vineyard. (BENEDICT XVI, EXHORTATION *AFRICAЕ MUNUS*, 19 NOVEMBER 2011, 167)

Yes, the Church is now calling you to be missionaries. How lucky we are to have Pope Francis now, building on this call, to articulate his dream for a missionary Church, hoping that you will make it a reality! Pope Francis writes:

I dream of a “missionary option”, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation. (POPE FRANCIS, APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*, 24 NOVEMBER 2013, 27)

Pope Francis dreams of a poor Church for the poor, a Church close to the abandoned and forgotten, a Church which conveys the tenderness of God. He wants an evangelical Church, called to measure itself constantly against the breadth and richness of the Gospel. He wants a Church willing to go forth from its comfort zone (cf. *EG*, 20) to the spiritual and existential peripheries.

Often we think of these “peripheries” or “margins” as places of great poverty. Very often, they are; however, in this country, there is great material wealth and great spiritual poverty, a loss of transcendence, and an increasing fragmentation in society. It is to this periphery that the Lord and your superiors have sent you, with the wisdom from your spiritual tradition and culture. While no one culture can capture the diversity of the Church. The Church goes forth to make Christ known to others in their cultural situations. The Holy Father states:

When properly understood, cultural diversity is not a threat to unity. The Holy Spirit, sent by the Father and the Son, transforms our hearts and enables us to enter into the perfect communion of the blessed Trinity where all things find their unity ... Evangelization joyfully acknowledges these varied treasures which the Holy Spirit pours out upon the Church.” (*EG*, 117)

You are being asked to share the precious treasure of your cultures and faith with the Church in the United States in the service of the mission of evangelization. Recently, the Holy Father gathered the nuncios in Rome, and he gave us a “Decalogue” of qualities of a nuncio, which forced each of us to examine ourselves, posing difficult questions. Having lived almost two decades in Africa, I want to pose some challenging questions to you as you reflect on the contributions that African clergy and religious can make to the Church in the United States:

1. You have been called to be a missionary in the United States. Are you a missionary? That is, are you truly missionary or do you simply carry out tasks to maintain an

existing system? What are you offering to the People of God here? Surely, many offer the sacraments, catechesis and formation, but are you facilitating the encounter with Jesus Christ and doing so with apostolic zeal? What more are you called to do in living your specific vocation?

2. Integration can be a critical component to evangelization. Have I received the best of American culture or the worst of it? Appreciating the talents and gifts of the lay faithful can enrich our ministry. What have I received from the People of God and what have I contributed to them from my own culture?

You have certainly made a contribution to the Church here in the United States, but if you had to “name” the contribution, what would it be? Moreover, as we think about contributing to the Church in the United States, we should ask: what is my motivation? Is it for my glory or my personal gain; or on the contrary, is my motivation the service of the People of God, God’s glory, and to witness to the Gospel, making its values present in the lives of the flock?

3. In addition to integration, I believe unity, especially within a presbyterate or local church, is an important aspect of missionary work. Do you see yourself as part of the People of God in the United States or as an outsider? Have you made an honest effort to integrate into the life of the parish and the local church? Do you participate in clergy gatherings, deanery meetings, and diocesan events? Do you know the local clergy well or make a serious effort to do so? Do you see other priests and religious as your brothers and sisters?
4. In my missionary work as a priest or religious, have I continued with my formation, even if this is humbling or demanding? When I was three years old, I recall my father speaking to me about a French Bishop in Madagascar who learned the local language and could speak it, making use of idioms and so on, even better than the locals. We can ask ourselves: What degree of effort do I undertake, or have I made to learn the language, to work on accent reduction, to continue with my theological and spiritual reading? People have high standards for their clergy, and we must rise to meet their expectations, but this requires discipline and effort.
5. The United States has been greatly affected by secularization. African culture is marked by a deep religiosity. Africans have a profound sense of awe in the presence of God. Do I convey this sense of transcendence and wonder in my celebration of the liturgy, and how do I convey it? Beyond the liturgy, how do the other aspects of my life convey the Presence of Christ to those whom I encounter?
6. How can the African experience, which includes the pain and suffering of colonization, help the Church in the United States to resist current efforts at “ideological colonization”?
7. Children are considered a blessing in African cultures – true gifts from God. What is that African clergy can uniquely provide in helping to build a culture of life and resist the throwaway culture?

8. With its strong emphasis on the Church as the Family of God, how can the presence of African clergy contribute to a greater spirit of hospitality, especially to new migrants who are arriving?
9. A priority for the Holy Father has been the accompaniment of married couples and families. What lessons have been learned by the Church in Africa that could be useful in supporting families here in the United States?
10. Knowing firsthand the experience of poverty, sickness, and violence, am I close to those who experience similar phenomena here in the United States? Do I act as a Good Samaritan, showing compassion? Have I conveyed empathy so that the poor, sick, and suffering experience the closeness of God?

I know that these are not easy questions to answer, but I pose them to you, without judgment, inviting you to reflect honestly on your own vocations as missionaries and as African clergy, called to serve the Church in the United States. Knowing the richness of your spiritual and cultural heritage, as well as the depth of your faith and devotion, I am confident that the Church in the United States is better off with your presence and ministry.

I conclude with the words of the Holy Father, given during his Apostolic Visit to Uganda in 2015:

In your own lives, whether in priestly ministry or in your religious consecration, you are called to carry on this great legacy, above all with quiet acts of humble service. Jesus wants to use you to touch the hearts of yet other people: he wants to use your mouths to proclaim his saving word, your arms to embrace the poor whom he loves, your hands to build up the communities of authentic missionary disciples. (POPE FRANCIS, "ADDRESS TO PRIESTS, MEN AND WOMEN RELIGIOUS, AND SEMINARIANS," ST. MARY CATHEDRAL, KAMPALA, 28 NOVEMBER 2015)