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KEFAS LAMAK

Trends and Shifts: Migration, Reverse Missions, and African Catholic Priests in Iowa City, USA



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PROLOGUE

The center of the Christian world, as scholars of Global Catholicism are increasingly telling us, is shifting from Europe and America to a decentered Africa and Latin America.¹ Statistical studies, for example, are showing that there are more Christians in the global South than there are in the global North.² The rate of international migration has also been growing, with mobility routes following older post-colonial trajectories as well as emerging transnational networks. Increasing numbers of people are moving from third-world countries to first-world countries for a variety of reasons, not only to find better economic prospects, financial relief, greater security, and educational opportunities, but also to proselytize and spread their faith.³

In recent decades, scholars of African Studies and Religion and Migration have noted that global missionary trajectories have also seen a significant reversal. Many Pentecostal Christians, for example, relocate and then revitalize Christianity in their new home countries, often by founding and sustaining new churches and Charismatic and Pentecostal movements. For example, in the last five years, the United Kingdom has recruited millions of health workers from English-speaking third-world countries to strengthen their health sector. These immigrants carry their Pentecostal faith with them and spread their faith in their new locale. This has had a multi-dimensional effect on urban areas throughout the United Kingdom; the proliferation of new immigrant churches (reverse missions) is only the most visible change being wrought on western European urban landscapes.

“Reverse mission,” a foundational concept in the study of global Catholicism,

1 Gino A. Zurlo, *Women in World Christianity: Building and Sustaining a Global Movement* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2023), 36. However, some are left with the former assumption that, America and Europe are still the centers of world Christianity because of the papacy in Rome, the number of theological colleges and seminaries in the West, and the number of Church buildings across towns and cities in America and Europe. Jose Casanova, “2000 Presidential Address: Religion, the New Millennium, and Globalization,” *Sociology of Religion*, 62, no. 4 (2001): 423.

2 Zurlo, *Women in World Christianity*, 36.

3 B.A. Adedibu, “Reverse missions or Migrant Sanctuaries? Migration, Symbolic Mapping, Missionary Challenges of Britain’s Black Majority Churches,” *Pneuma*, 33, no. 3 (2013): 405-423. DOI:10.1163/15700747-12341347

has emerged to describe the mission activities of people from the third world who agentively engage the religious landscape of North American and western European metropolises, cities and urban centers that once “sent” missionaries abroad instead of receiving them.⁴ It is the reverse of a historical pattern when people of European descent moved from their countries to Africa, South America, and Asia to spread various forms of Christianity (Catholics, Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Pentecostals). Now, people from Asia, Africa, and South America take similar roles directly or indirectly in western Europe and North America. Reverse missions have many phases and dimensions; for example, in reverse missions, there are no explicitly religious organizations that recruit and send people from third-world countries to proselytize in western Europe and North America’s cosmopolitan cities and towns. Instead, people from third-world countries go to first-world countries as immigrants and start churches, following a model of agentive public religious action akin to what they did in their home countries: They organize worship for small numbers of immigrants; gather in greater numbers until they can appoint a pastor from among their community or seek one from their home country; and eventually set up a physical building space for worship and other activities. In addition, many immigrant churches do missions through social networks such as food pantries, charities for the homeless, campaigns against drugs, and community outreach.

Although scholars specializing on contemporary African societies as well as religion and migration have written extensively about reverse mission as it has been practiced in and mediated through transnational Pentecostal movements, reverse mission in global Catholicism remains an understudied area. This lacuna is partly due to the assumption that the Catholic Church is a centralized and hierarchically-determined system, and thus may not be affected by dispersed and bottom-up trends like contemporary transnational migration. To fill this lacuna, in this article I will present research conducted in Iowa City, Iowa, United States, and I will argue that there has been a reversal of missionary trajectories in midwestern American Catholic churches, with African priests supporting and

4 Adedibu, “Reverse missions,” 405.

sustaining Catholic traditions and parishes in this region. This study is based on interviews and interactions with five African priests. Four of these priests serve in Saint Mary's Parish, the Newman Center, and the University of Iowa Teaching Hospital. One is a former Catholic priest in Saint Mary's Catholic Church. This study contributes to general knowledge in African Studies, Religion and Migration, and American Catholic Studies by describing the contributions of African priests to the sustenance and growth of American Catholic churches.

METHODOLOGY

Because this study is focused on the contributions of African priests in Roman Catholicism, the researcher employed two fieldwork research methods: interviews and participant observation. During my graduate studies at the University of Iowa, I learned that a few African Catholic priests served in Saint Mary's Catholic Church, the Newman Center, and the University of Iowa Teaching Hospital. This study stems from my friendship with one of the African priests who asked me to work with him on a particular project in the fall of 2023. We exchanged contact information and became friends. He then told me about other African priests. The findings of this work are from oral interviews I conducted with these priests.

I also interacted with one American priest at the Newman Center and two office assistants who gave me more detailed information about the history of the Catholic Church in Iowa City and the Midwest. Finally, I attended weekly Mass on Tuesdays and Fridays and a few Sunday services and went to the Newman Catholic Center to get coffee and observe regular activities taking place around the center. I also used secondary sources to situate this paper in the larger discourse of African Studies, American Catholic Studies, and Religion and Migration.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This article examines the history of Catholicism and its missions to Africa, the history of Catholicism and ethnic diversity in Iowa City, and the intersections of migration, religion, and missions. The following research question guided this study:

1. **The Catholic Church and its Global Community:** The Catholic Church has had an extended global network since the fifteenth century, when Jesuit missionaries traveled to North America, Asia, and Africa. How has the global Catholic community and mission network been maintained, reconstructed, and revived throughout these historical periods until the present?
2. **Catholic Traditions and Ethnicity in the Midwest:** Historically, Saint Mary's Catholic Church was founded by European immigrants, especially newly-arrived German and Irish workers and others from southern and eastern Europe, and has long had ethnic and cultural diversity. How has the historical ethnic profile of Saint Mary's Catholic Church shaped the distinctive practice and understanding of Catholicism in Iowa City and the Midwest in general?
3. **Reverse Mission:** Although reverse mission is a recently emerging concept in the study of global Christianity, it applies to groups that foster non-Western immigrants' involvement in Christian practices in Europe and America. How does the concept of reverse missions apply to African priests' religious activities in Iowa City? How have the five African priests in Iowa City contributed to the maintenance and growth of "midwestern American" Catholicism?

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This section summarizes the general findings of a study among five African Catholic priests serving in Iowa City. Three priests were from Ghana, Congo, and Nigeria respectively. One returned to his home diocese after serving for five years and was replaced by another priest from Ghana. The priest from Nigeria was in

a different Iowa parish before being moved to Iowa City. Four of the priests I interviewed serve in three locations in Iowa City: The University Teaching Hospital, Saint Mary's Catholic Church, and the Newman Center. The identities and names are pseudonymized for the safety and privacy of all those involved in this research.

I was originally drawn to examine the phenomenon of African priests serving in the American Midwest 8 years ago. As I traveled around the US for conferences and work, I encountered many African Catholic priests, including clergy who were serving on or adjacent to university campuses. For example, when I went to Baylor University in Waco, Texas, I encountered Nigerian-born and trained priests assigned to both the Catholic Student Center and Providence Hospital. In 2020, I moved to Iowa City to start a Ph.D. in Religious Studies and African American Studies and, in my first week, an acquaintance suggested I contact an African Catholic priest serving nearby. As a non-Catholic and an outsider with little understanding of Catholic traditions, my knowledge was limited to what I read from books and my interactions with Catholic priests and Catholic adherents in Nigeria and in America. I had always believed that Catholic priests are trained in local seminaries and usually stay close to their home dioceses to serve. So, finding many African priests far from the dioceses where they were raised and trained – in cities and towns of the US – raised questions.

A few findings of this research are: First, there are significant numbers of African priests in the Davenport Diocese. In my interview with one priest, Jude Olu, he mentioned that the Davenport Diocese, which Iowa City Catholic churches fall under, has many African priests spread across parishes, student centers, and hospitals. Olu stated, “Out of the forty-six ordained priests that the Davenport Diocese has, approximately fourteen are from various dioceses across Africa.”⁵ African priests make up twenty-five percent of priests in the diocese. Similarly, Fr. Friday Goji, explained in an interview, “Oh, there are so many of us around the Davenport, Des Moines, and other dioceses in the US.”⁶ Other African priests who

5 Jude Olu. Oral interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 11/05/2023.

6 Friday Goji. Oral interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 10/03/2023.

were interviewed for this study also revealed that this state of affairs is increasingly prevalent in recent years.⁷ The “crisis of vocations” is a well-established trend in many American dioceses, and Goji's response suggests that midwestern dioceses in Iowa are also experiencing lower interest in the call to vocation from young Catholic adherents. This seems to be the primary reason American Catholic dioceses are looking to Africa, Asia, and Latin America for priests to serve in their churches.⁸ Recruiting African and non-Euro-American priests to Saint Mary's Catholic Church, the Newman Center, and the University of Iowa Teaching Hospital is necessary to meet local Catholics' pastoral needs, a practice and rationale that in turn shapes African priests' self-understanding and service in the mode of reverse mission.

Another significant finding of this project suggests that priests must reconstruct their image of their future clerical service once they are transferred internationally, which might come as a surprise to these clergymen. I asked one priest, Amos Mark, to share how and why he was transferred to the Diocese of Davenport and his parish in Iowa City. Mark explained that the bishops of two dioceses initiated his transfer from his home diocese to the Davenport Diocese.⁹ “I was trained to be a diocesan priest. Diocesan priests in the Roman Catholic Church are trained to work within a particular diocese. So, I never dreamed of leaving my home diocese at any point in time.”¹⁰ Dauda Jacob, another priest, notes, like Mark, that he is here in Iowa City because the Bishop of Davenport is friends with his bishop. The former made a personal request to the bishop in Cape Coast Ghana to send priests to Davenport.¹¹

This finding is significant, at least for scholars of global Christianity who focus on

7 Friday Goji. Oral Interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 10/03/2023.

8 One of the office assistants at the Newman Center, Suzi Dickson, explained that in some dioceses in America, churches had to be closed because there were no priests to manage them or because of low parish membership or interest in the call to vocation. Suzy Dickson. Oral interview in Iowa City. Dickson suggested that the low interest in the call to vocation in America might best be explained by cultural shifts, a lower birth rate, and a lack of interest in any form of religion, not necessarily Catholicism. Interviewed on 03/05/2024.

9 Amos Mark. Oral interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 12/06/2023.

10 Dauda Jacob. Oral interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 12/10/2023.

11 Dauda Jacob. Oral interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 12/10/2023.

Pentecostalism rather than Catholicism, because there is an assumption in the field that all international clerical transfers are mediated through the Church's center in Rome and even initiated within the Vatican. My conversations with African priests in Iowa City reveal a different arrangement – friendly connections among bishops – that can lead to international transfers. Another Catholic priest, Adam Matthew, clarifies that all diocesan transfers are done in consultation with the priests themselves. The priest can decline any international assignment, he insists.¹² I also asked Adam Matthew why he is serving in Iowa City, how he came to serve in this diocese and position. He told me, “I am in Iowa because I chose to be here.”¹³ He continues, “Although I never thought I would ever come to serve as a priest here in America, when my bishop asked me if I could serve in the Davenport Diocese, I replied that he should give me more time to pray and decide.”¹⁴ Matthew concludes, “After talking with family about the mission, I accepted it.”¹⁵ All the priests I interviewed for this study mentioned that their assignment with the Davenport Diocese was meant to last five years, and the Bishop of Davenport would decide whether to renew their contract for an additional five years or request others priests to replace them. Again, in the context of the contract renewal, the African priests can decide whether they want to stay in the same diocese, move to a different diocese, or return home.

The last finding of this research is related to the intersection between migration and reverse missions in the American Catholic Church. Recent global migration has significantly impacted the Catholic churches across America, particularly in Iowa City. New immigrants from Africa tend to become members of already-existing local Catholic parishes, growing these congregations alongside and within existing Catholic populations; starting a new African immigrant Catholic parish is harder than starting a new independent Pentecostal congregation for African immigrants.

For example, African students admitted to the University of Iowa join the Newman Student Catholic Center or the nearby Saint Mary's Catholic Church.

12 Adam Matthew. Oral interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 12/20/2023.

13 Adam Matthew. Oral interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 12/20/2023.

14 Adam Matthew. Oral interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 12/20/2023.

15 Adam Matthew. Oral interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 01/02/2024.



When I asked Jude Olu whether recent migration trend impacts the Catholic Church, he replied, “Yes! Social movements and trends, including migration, affect Catholic churches too. For example, right now in Iowa City, we have a large number of Catholic adherents in Saint Mary’s Catholic Church who moved here due to the crises in their country years ago, and every year, we have international students adding to our numbers from various African, Asian and Latin American countries too.”¹⁶ Amos Mark made a similar statement while describing the influence of global migration across the Davenport Diocese. He said, “Catholic African immigrants are found across Catholic churches within the Davenport Diocese and the Midwest in general.”¹⁷

In addition to the intersection of migration and local Catholicism in Iowa City, all the Catholic priests I interviewed for this study compared themselves to historical Western missionaries, those who brought Christianity to Africa during the early modern period. Friday Goji responded in the affirmative when I asked if he understood the concept of reverse missions and if he saw himself as a missionary to Iowa City. He responded that every Christian is supposed to be mission-minded, especially if they left their country for another to do the work of proselytizing.¹⁸ The same goes for Adam Mathew when asked the same question. He insists that as soon as his bishop told him about his transfer to Davenport, he began to see himself as a missionary to the local congregation or institution he would be working with.¹⁹ The responses of the African priests suggest that reverse missions are not only a construct that applies to Pentecostal and mainline churches in Europe and America but a global shift that cuts across denominations.

16 Jude Olu. Oral Interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 01/10/2024.

17 Amos Mark. Oral Interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 01/15/2024.

18 Friday Goji. Interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 10/03/2023.

19 Adam Mathew. Interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 01/22/2024.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF CATHOLIC MISSIONS IN AFRICA

This section briefly reviews how Catholic Christianity arrived in Africa, from the Middle Ages to the modern period. This overview aims to historicize contemporary African priests, Africa, and the recent shift in African priests serving as pastors in parishes across the US in world missions. All the Catholic priests I interviewed agreed that Catholic Christianity came to Africa through the work of Catholic missions: the Jesuit fathers, the Capuchin, and the Fathers of the Cross, among others. Narrating this history from oral interviews, Dauda Jacob notes that “Catholicism came to Africa through mostly the Portuguese and the French from the 1500s; in some places, they made significant gains, and in other places, their successes were cut short by the resistance of the local communities and religions.”²⁰ On the same note, when I asked Friday Goji about his conversion story to Christianity and how he became a Catholic, he explained that he was born into a Catholic family and that Catholic Christianity was in his community as early as the 1880s through European missionaries.²¹

Catholic missions and missionaries led two mission campaigns to African countries and regions. The first was in the 1500s, immediately after the Reformation period. Catholic missionaries traveled to Africa for the first time in search of African converts. The second wave of western missionary activities in Africa started after the abolition of slavery by the British in the early 1800s. Africa’s most recent Western missionary efforts are more pronounced than those of the early modern period, because of the conversion successes western Catholic missionaries achieved and also because of the nexus of missionary work with colonialism. Modern missions and modern European colonialism arrived simultaneously, so colonialists gave the impression that Europeans generally came to Africa with three mission mandates: colonization, conversion, and commerce. Except for Congo, Angola, Guinea, and a few places where the Catholic Church has been continuously active since the 1500s, Catholicism in many other regions

²⁰ Dauda Jacob. Interview at Iowa City. Interviewed on 12/20/2023.

²¹ Friday Goji. Interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 10/03/2023.

was founded and took shape as a mission project under these modern conditions.

Catholic missionary activities in the early modern period began sometime after 1415, with the fall of Ceuta, and the fall of Constantinople in 1453, and were initiated by Franciscan Augustinians, Capuchin Dominicans, and Jesuit clerics working for the Portuguese Crown.²² The Jesuit Fathers were among the earliest Catholic missionaries to colonize different regions of Africa.²³ Elizabeth Isichei's work, *History of Christianity in Africa*, historicizes the arrivals and interactions of Catholic missionaries in Africa in the mid-1400s, examining Warri, Benin, and Guinea as case studies.²⁴ Some missionaries had tremendous success and were supported by indigenous people. In other areas, Isichei notes that Catholic missionaries were hindered by local resistance.²⁵ Catholicism came to Africa through Catholic missionaries of the West, and they arrived at almost the same time as the Portuguese instituted the system of chattel slavery in this area.

For many African Studies scholars, especially the historian John Thornton, Congo, Angola, and Guinea are the earliest territories where Western Catholic missionaries made significant progress in the 1400s and 1500s.²⁶ Catholic missionary campaigns in Congo first persuaded the kings of these regions to convert, and thousands of Congolese followed by accepting Catholicism and making it their religion.²⁷

The people of Congo adopted Catholicism and imbued it with pride-inducing

22 Joseph Abraham Levi, "Portuguese and other European Missionaries in Africa: A Look at their Linguistic Production and Attitudes 1415-1885," *Journal of Historiographia Linguistica* 36, no. 2-3 (2009): 363. The reviews (sections) on the history of Catholicism in Africa are based on comprehensive research I have been doing on African Catholicism from available primary and secondary sources. Similar findings are found in two of my publications.

23 Jeroen Dewulf, *Afro-Atlantic Catholics: America's First Black Christians*. (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2022), 36-38.

24 Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa*. (Lawrenceville, New Jersey: Africa World Press, Inc, 1995), 61.

25 Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa*, 61.

26 John Thornton. "The Kingdom of Kongo and Palo Moyembe: Reflection: Reflections on an African American Religion." *Slavery and Abolition* 37, no. 1 (2015): 1-22. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/014403>.

27 Benjamin Hendrickx, "Kimpa Vita (Dona Beatriz) and "Afro Catholicism": re-examining controversies and unsolved problem." *Pharos Journal of Theology* 102 (2021): 1-14.

characteristics, according to Thornton. He notes, “All the lay and clerical observers, who wrote about Kongo from 1760 to 1860, agreed that the Kongoleses took great pride in their Christian identity. This was not just the elites but ordinary people all over the country, as we see in the lengthy assessment of the Portuguese secular priest Rafael Castello de Vide in 1781-1788.”²⁸ In the eighteenth century, Congoleses artists created large crucifixes with an African Jesus on the Cross, identifiably Congoleses. These crosses were made throughout the region and circulated widely. Alongside these images of Jesus, they also made statues of Saint Anthony, less identifiably African but part of the Christian spiritual inventory of the Congo Church.²⁹ By the eighteenth century, the Congoleses saw Catholicism not only as a purely European religion but also as a Congoleses religion. This could be partly because so many generations of Congoleses were born into Catholic Christianity, and there was no need for a priest to convert them.³⁰

Another reason Catholic Christianity survived in Congo and Angola is the zeal and effort with which the people of Congo defended and identified with it. Isichei notes that, as in Congo and Angola, Guinea’s early modern Catholic missionary activities succeeded in winning many converts. She notes, “West Africa produced several indigenous priests and brothers, often from the Cape Verde Islands or Sao Tome.”³¹ Isichei continues, “In 1494, a German visitor to Portugal saw many black men educated in Latin and Theology.”³²

Western Catholic missionaries tried to convert the people in other west African kingdoms, including Benin and Warri, but failed until the second wave of missionary efforts in the eighteenth century.³³ Historians Isichei and Emmanuel A.S. Egbunu both discuss the failure of early modern Jesuit missionaries in the

28 Thornton, “The Kingdom of Kongo,” 4; see also John Thornton. *The Kongoleses Saint Anthony: Don Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684-1706* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 100.

29 Thornton, “The Kingdom of Kongo,” 5.

30 Thornton, “The Kingdom of Kongo,” 5.

31 Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa*, 55.

32 Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa*, 55.

33 Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa*, 160.



Calabar and Warri kingdoms.³⁴ French Capuchins founded a mission station in Togo in 1644, but the populace expelled the missionaries after being incited by English and Dutch traders. The latter, according to Isichei, were afraid that the conversion of the indigenous people to Christianity could affect their business in the region.³⁵

After the abolition of Slavery, Catholic missionaries and former enslaved Africans from Brazil and Portugal returned to several spaces in Africa as missionaries alongside and apart from Western missionaries. Isichei notes, “The modern phase of Catholic mission work in West Africa began with the arrival of Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny at Goree in Senegal in 1819.”³⁶ Male Catholic congregations, Isichei continues, were led by the Holy Ghost Fathers and the Society of African Missions in nineteenth-century West Africa.³⁷ Catholicism's emphasis on venerating ancestors, lavish engagement with relics and other material manifestations of faith, and stance towards drinking alcohol and other practices allowed Africans to see continuity with their former way of life and traditions. Since its return in the nineteenth century, Catholic Christianity has drawn on these synchronicities to become one of the largest Christian groups in west Africa.

The African priests I interviewed in Iowa City had little information about the early modern period of missionary activity in west Africa, and instead were more familiar with the second wave of missions that began in the mid-1800s. The Catholic priest Amos Mark explains that, as a child, he was familiar with many Western Catholic priests who came to his diocese under the auspices of Catholic groups that were founded in this latter period of mission work.³⁸ “Until the 1980s, when I was growing up in Cape Coast Diocese, we had priests of European descent from different countries. Those European priests received support from their home countries to build clinics, churches, and schools, among others.”³⁹ Adam

34 Emmanuel A.S Egbunu. *Pathfinders for Christianity in Northern Nigeria (1862-1940): Early C.M.S. Activities at the Niger-Benue Confluence*. (Oregon: Eugene Press, 2021), 73.

35 Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa*, 60.

36 Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa*, 161.

37 Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa*, 161.

38 Amos Mark. Interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 01/15/ 2024.

39 Amos Mark. Interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 01/15/ 2024.

Matthew added that, until recently, European missionary priests were present in many African seminaries, where they trained indigenous African priests.⁴⁰ Matthew recalled the story of Fr. Alocious Joseph, a European priest who served for over forty years in a Ghanaian seminary before retiring to Italy, his home country, in 2010.⁴¹ “Many African seminarians, fellow lecturers, and the Catholic communities in the Cape Coast Diocese love Fr. Alocious. It felt like he should not leave. His memory is very much alive in people who had contact with him.”⁴² The memory of Western Catholic missionaries is preserved in sites, archives, buildings, and African seminaries.

Interestingly, some missionaries who died in the mission fields in Africa were buried in parishes, seminaries, and local communities. Fr. Jude Olu, one of the Catholic priests I interviewed for this study, was interested in discussing memories of these Western sisters, and priests.⁴³ For example, he mentioned that in different parishes in his home diocese, there are several graves of Western missionaries who served in his diocese. Anthropologists and historians have conducted research at these sites. The local people have not forgotten about Western missionaries’ contributions.⁴⁴ While early modern Catholic missionaries did not leave behind records or visible signs of their work, recent Western missionaries left documents as well as gravesites and that are still visible in communities, churches, and special collections.

CATHOLICISM IN IOWA CITY AND REVERSE MISSIONS

Michael J. Pfeifer gives a brief history of the founding of Saint Mary's Catholic Church in Iowa City in 1828. Iowa City, once the capital of Iowa, is now a small “college town” whose population has grown slowly since its founding. According to census data, Iowa City numbered 1,250 in 1850 and grew to 5,214 by 1860

40 Adam Matthew. Interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 01/22/2024.

41 Adam Matthew. Interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 01/22/2024.

42 Adam Matthew. Interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 01/22/2024.

43 Jude Olu. Interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 01/10/2024.

44 Jude Olu. Interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 01/10/2024.

but did not surpass 10,000 until 1910, and by 1940 had reached only 17,182.⁴⁵ Today, Iowa City is estimated to have around 74,596 people.⁴⁶ Fr. Samuel Mazzuchelli, one of Iowa City's first Catholic clergy, was assigned by the Bishop of Cincinnati, Edward Fenwick, as a missionary priest for the Northwest territory. Mazzuchelli was a Dominican friar born in Milan in 1806 and moved to America during the time of Napoleon and Austrian rule when Dominican priests suffered suppression.⁴⁷ He was assigned to serve Catholic communities around the Great Lakes, particularly Native Americans, the French, and mixed ancestry *Mentis fur* traders. Fr. Mazzuchelli also served sacraments to miners, mostly German and Irish workers in Galena and Dubuque in the 1830s. Pfeifer notes that, "After the establishment of the Diocese of Dubuque in 1837 and of the Iowa territory in 1838, Mazzuchelli assisted Mathias Loras, the first Bishop of Dubuque, in rapidly organizing Catholic congregations and building churches in territorial settlements including Davenport and Burlington."⁴⁸

The Newman Catholic Student Center of the University of Iowa was founded in 1944, a century after the first German, Irish, and southern European Catholic immigrants arrived in Iowa. In a conversation, the center's current director remarked that the Newman Center would be celebrating its eightieth birthday this year.⁴⁹ African priests, born and trained in various west African countries, are now pastoring the same churches that Fr. Mazzuchelli founded for the earliest Catholics in Iowa City, whether they were workers in local mines or their children and grandchildren who used their prosperity to attend college at the University of Iowa. Hence, Catholicism has been in Iowa City since the 1800s and the first Catholics were German and Irish immigrants served by newly-arrived Italian priests.

In Iowa City, European immigrants were dominant in Saint Mary's Parish through the 1940s. In "The Making of Midwestern Catholicism: Identities, Ethnicity,

45 Michael J. Pfeifer. "The Making of a Midwestern Catholicism: Identities, Ethnicity, and Catholic Culture in Iowa City, 1840-1940." *The Annals of Iowa*, 76, no. 3 (2017): 290-315.

46 Pfeifer, "The Making of a Midwestern Catholicism," 295.

47 Pfeifer, "The Making of a Midwestern Catholicism," 295.

48 Pfeifer, "The Making of a Midwestern Catholicism," 295.

49 Oral interviews at Iowa City. Interviewed on 03/15/2024.

and Catholic Culture in Iowa City, 1840-1940," Michael J. Pfeifer discusses the complexities of the nineteenth-century Catholic Church in Iowa City, from the cultural makeup and diversity of the parish to its religious dynamics.⁵⁰ Pfeifer cites examples of conflict between German, Irish, and Czech immigrants in Iowa's newly emerging Catholic Church. "[T]he story of contending altar statues of ethnic Patron Saints," he observes, "is all that remains within the parish's collective memory of what were highly contested battles among three ethnic patrons of the Germans, the Irish, and Bohemians (the Czechs) over space, clerical leadership, devotional styles, and the nature of lay involvement in what was Iowa City's only Catholic parish for several decades in the mid-19th century."⁵¹

On one of my visits to the Newman Student Catholic Center, the office assistant offered to take me on an hour-long tour, explaining the historical context of some events that occurred in Saint Mary's Parish in the nineteenth and twentieth century when European immigrants dominated the Church.⁵² There were tensions between the different ethnic groups who founded and attended Saint Mary's Catholic Church, conflicts over where the altar and statues of the saints should be placed. For example, the high altar in Saint Mary's Catholic Church is flanked on the left by a statue of St. Patrick, the Patron Saint of Ireland, and on the right by St. Boniface, the Patron Saint of German Catholics.⁵³ Identifying with their ethnic groups and nationality, each of the dominant ethnic groups in Saint Mary's preferred sitting on the pews where their patron statues were located. Most Irish members regularly sat on the left, and Germans sat on the right.⁵⁴ Rivalry and tension grew among the three ethnic groups of immigrants in Saint Mary's Catholic Church after its founding. Because of these tensions, other Catholic congregations were founded by Irish Catholic immigrants; these parishes were later integrated back into Saint Mary's. Pfeifer notes, "Uneasily integrated for several decades in a single parish housing the town's three significant ethnic Catholic communities, St. Mary's Parish would fracture in favor of ethnic

50 Pfeifer, "The Making of a Midwestern Catholicism," 290.

51 Pfeifer, "The Making of a Midwestern Catholicism," 290.

52 Suzy Dickson. Interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 03/10/2024.

53 Oral history from Suzy Dickson and Pfeifer, 290.

54 Suzy Dickson. Oral interviews. Interviewed on 03/10/2024.



separatism, the formation of distinct ethnic parishes, in later decades of the 19th century.”⁵⁵ Pfeifer notes that in the twentieth century, assimilation and Americanization pressures that also reshaped the larger society made Saint Mary’s into a more ethnically-neutral space.⁵⁶

For some time now, Saint Mary’s Catholic Church has been home to recent African immigrants, and the Newman Center at the University of Iowa has become home to many Catholic international students. Amos Mark mentioned families of African Catholic international students from Nigeria, Ghana, South Sudan, and Congo who are regular members and attendees of the Newman Catholic Student Center. The Midwest has continued to be home to African immigrant communities in Omaha and Lincoln, Nebraska; Chicago, Illinois; Madison, Wisconsin; and in Des Moines, Cedar Rapids, and Iowa City in Iowa. The majority of African immigrant communities found in the Midwest are made up of people granted asylum in the last two or three decades due to crises and wars in countries like Congo, Somalia, Sudan, and Tanzania, among others. Because of their numbers, they can quickly regroup to start (mostly Pentecostal) Christian congregations that serve their religious needs and foster ethnic, national, and linguistic identity. Numerous Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal congregations of Sudanese immigrants, for example, exist in Omaha and Des Moines. In Iowa City, there are many French-speaking churches that serve Congolese populations. In Saint Mary’s Catholic Church, a Congolese congregation meets regularly for a separate Mass led by a Congolese Catholic priest.

The Catholic tradition has been part of the history of Congo and Angola since the early modern period to the present. Sometimes, scholars identify a tradition of “Congolese Catholicism,” which occupies a unique nexus point with the cultures of the Congo region. One of the distinctive features of Congolese Catholicism is the use of drums and other musical instruments in Masses. On my tour of Saint Mary’s Catholic Church, I asked Suzy Dickson if parishioners use musical in-

55 Pfeifer, “The Making of a Midwestern Catholicism,” 294.

56 Pfeifer, “The Making of a Midwestern Catholicism,” 294.

struments during Mass. “Only when the Congolese congregation is meeting,” she remarked.⁵⁷

Since its founding, Saint Mary's Catholic Church has had Catholic priests from a variety of different ethnic backgrounds. In 1828, the priests of Saint Mary's were mainly from Europe (German, Irish, and Italian). For decades, priests from the same European ethnic groups pastored both the Newman Student Center and Saint Mary's. When Saint Mary's was founded, Europe's Catholic Church had already begun to sponsor Catholic missionary activities in several parts of Africa. Today, the services of African Catholic priests are in demand in the US and other European countries, but these priests are not pastoring parishes made up of Catholics from their home countries in Africa.

Training priests takes at least eight years, and this formation has a profound effect on the African priests I interviewed. Adam Matthew remembers his training in the seminary and how it was a long, thorough process. Priests engage in practices of spiritual discipline, including fasting, solitude, and prayer. Apart from the spiritual discipline component of the training, there is also the rigors of academic studies in philosophy and theology.⁵⁸ Anyone enrolled in the seminary must have the specific endorsement of their parents and the serving bishop of the diocese before answering the call to vocation. After arriving in America, African priests are housed in the center of the diocese, Davenport, for orientation for three to four months before they are sent to their parishes. Dauda Jacob narrates how, upon his arrival, he was put under the care of other local priests to familiarize himself with how things are done in the Davenport Diocese.⁵⁹ Additionally, he tried to observe how members relate with their priests.

I asked him a question on contextual differences between being a priest in Davenport and his home diocese. Jacob said, “In my home diocese, where I have been a priest for over eighteen years, members hardly call us directly by name. They referred to us as ‘Father...,’ but it is not the case here in America, and it took

57 Suzy Dickson. Oral Interviews in Iowa City. Interviewed on 03/10/2024.

58 Adam Mathew. Oral Interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 01/22/2024.

59 Dauda Jacob. Oral Interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 12/20/2023.

me time to adjust to that.”⁶⁰ Regarding contextual differences and similarities, Fr. Friday Goji states that their African members easily relate to them when they assume work in a particular parish. However, Americans take time to get to know the priest before going into deep friendship and even religious activities and rituals like confession.⁶¹

The differences between how priests in Africa are welcomed and treated by their members and how they are here in the Midwest have much to do with cultural and contextual differences. In African culture, religious leaders are given special reverence, even in how they are addressed with notable titles of honor, such as Reverend Father or Pastor. In some Christian denominations, members call their pastors “Daddy” and their wives “Mummy,” irrespective of their age. American society and culture operate differently; American society does not emphasize titles and tries to mute the effects of differences of hierarchy, age, and status. Also, American society operates in an individualistic way, where everyone keeps to themselves unless they choose to be open to people around them.

Most Catholic missionaries who served in African countries during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were never called immigrants, but rather missionaries. Some Western missionaries stayed long enough to be regarded as immigrants in these adopted countries. Nevertheless, they were not given this title. The African priests I interviewed in this paper were reluctant to call themselves “immigrants,” I believe, because they expected to one day leave the United States. The priests understand immigrants to be people who stay in a country longer than five or ten years. Amos Mark, for example, recalled that before coming to America, his bishop told him he would serve in Iowa City for only five years, after which his contract could be renewed.⁶² Most African priests I interviewed plan on staying for at most ten years.⁶³ Amos Mark said that although they are away from their home dioceses,

60 Dauda Jacob. Oral Interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 12/20/2023.

61 Friday Goji. Oral Interviews in Iowa City. Interviewed on 10/03/2023.

62 Amos Mark. Oral interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 01/15/2024.

63 Friday Goji. Oral Interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 10/03/2023. Although none had indicated that they plan to stay longer, Fr. Friday Goji explains that they have the freedom and choice to decide not to go back to Africa and apply for a transfer of service to an American diocese with the consent of their bishops in Africa, the bishop of the diocese they want to transfer their service to,

they are very much in touch with their bishops, colleagues, friends, and families in Africa.⁶⁴ Occasionally, they called their home bishops to update them on their work in Iowa City. African priests serving in Iowa City see themselves as missionaries first, and only later they might become immigrants.

Hence, African priests in Iowa City and the Davenport Diocese pastor parishes, serve in hospitals as chaplains, and work at the university's Student Center. They are, first and foremost, missionaries. Given the reluctance of the priests to be called immigrants, this paper has situated them as missionaries and compared them to western missionaries who brought Christianity to different parts of Africa. When I asked Adam Matthew whether he thinks he is a missionary here in America, he responds, "Absolutely yes." Adam Matthew defines a missionary as, "a person who takes their religion to another community or country; there is no better way to describe myself but a missionary."⁶⁵ Missions and missionaries are shifting from the first-world to the third-world, as is evident in the material presented in this article, and Christians from the third-world are not only reversing the conventional trajectories of missions but also changing the identities of missionaries themselves.

EPILOGUE

This paper examines migration and changes in global missions, "reverse missions," in the Catholic Church. The sources for this research are interviews with five African priests, four serving in Saint Mary's Catholic Church, the University of Iowa Teaching Hospital, the Newman Student Catholic Center, and one a priest who served in Saint Mary's Catholic Church and returned to his home diocese. This study contributes new knowledge to global Catholic Studies, African Studies, and the study of religion and migration through an exploration why African priests can be found in Iowa City as pastors and how they understand their roles in this context. Although there is much research on reverse missions with Pentecostal churches and immigrant churches in the United States and Europe, the same phe-

and a notification to the Vatican.

64 Amos Mak. Oral Interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 01/15/2024.

65 Adam Matthew. Interview in Iowa City. Interviewed on 01/22/2024.



nomenon as it takes shape in the Catholic Church requires additional study. Dioceses are looking to other parts of the world for priests who can sustain and grow their parishes; amid the Church's current "crisis of vocation," the only options are to invite priests from former missionary fields to work in the US or to close or merge parishes.

Saint Mary's Catholic Church in Iowa City was founded by European priests for European immigrants in the early 1800s. At its early founding, a few Italian, German, and Irish priests pastored the same parish for decades. Recently, African priests have been transferred to the same parish as pastors. This shift is reminiscent of two historical events that African priests in Iowa represent: the history of European immigrant priests in Iowa City and western Catholic missionaries to Africa in the early modern and modern periods. Using examples in this paper, I argue that African and third-world priests are reversing missions across Europe and America.

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