

What was in America

-Is Now in Africa-

By Joe Tremblay

The Promise of Africa:

Philip Jenkins in his book, *The Next Christendom*, argued that Africa is likely to be the next bastion of Catholicism in the twenty-first century. What medieval Catholicism was to Europe, today's Catholicism is to Africa. In fact, in the year 1900 there were only 9.9 million Christians in Africa. But at the turn of the millennium, they numbered 360 million. It is estimated that at least 8 million Africans are baptized every year; which amounts to about 20,000 baptisms a day.



Also, writing from Nigeria earlier this year, Adam Nossiter contended that the Catholic Church is the main driving force behind these conversions. Even in recent years, the Church has enjoyed considerable growth. In his *New York Times* piece, "Church Helps Fill a Void in Africa", Nossiter wrote the following:

"With 16 percent of the world's Catholics now living in Africa, the church's future, many say, is here. The Catholic population in Africa grew nearly 21 percent between 2005 and 2010, far outstripping other parts of the world. While the number of priests in North America and Europe declined during the same period, in Africa they grew by 16 percent. The seminaries, clerical officials here say, are bursting with candidates, and African priests are being sent to take over churches in former colonial powers."

The million dollar question is this: *What accounts for the current growth of the Church in Africa?* The answer to this question will undoubtedly aid pastors and parish leaders in breathing life into their adult faith formation programs.

Africa like America:

Believe it or not, the surge of Catholicism in Africa as it exists in the twenty-first century is reminiscent of the Church's robust growth in America in years past. From 1841 to 1971 the Catholic Church in America grew by leaps and bounds. In 1850, for instance, Catholics were only 5% of the population in the United States. But by 1906, they made up 17% of the population. Indeed, in less than one hundred years, the Catholic Church became the single largest church in America.

But it doesn't stop there. Between 1940 and 1960 the Church doubled in size. Bible sales and distribution from 1949 to 1953 increased by 140 percent. Investment for building churches was at 25 million in 1946, 409 million

in 1950 and rose to one billion in 1960. Furthermore, the Catholic Church was responsible for educating 12 percent of the children in the United States. Moreover, only one out of a thousand priests left the priesthood in 1960. However, in 1971 we begin to see a decline. And for those of us who work for the Church, we have become all too acquainted with the statistics illustrating that decline. No need to regurgitate bad news.

Impressive but Imperfect:

Now, it has to be conceded that the impressive growth of Catholicism in America had its imperfections. Not all of it had its roots in rich soil; especially between 1940 and 1960. During these years, many entered the Church for social reasons. But as historian Christopher Dawson said, if people become Catholic for social reasons, they will cease being Catholic for the same reasons. And that is precisely what happened during the post-1960's era. Indeed, the culture rapidly shifted away from Christianity. As such, what the Church gained from 1940 to 1960, she lost from 1970 to 1990.



Another concession before we go forward: Not all of the historical factors which led to the growth of Catholicism can be duplicated in our day. The pioneer days in America with the promise of getting a new start in life and with the opportunity to homestead attracted countless Catholic immigrants. In the century that followed, the Great Depression and World War II gave Americans fresh awareness of their mortality. And when death lingers nearby, religion suddenly becomes relevant. These factors, no doubt, led to an increase in the number of Catholics in America.

However, if we were to leave it at that, we would be cheating ourselves out of some very important insights. From 1841 to 1971, there were attitudes and practices (note: these can be duplicated) within the Church that led to more conversions. As you know, with a greater number of conversions, more pews are filled. And as every parish business manager knows, when the pews are occupied, the collection baskets fill up.

Similarly, there are attitudes and practices among Catholics in Africa that have led to a robust growth for the Church. Below, are a *few bullet-point-reasons* why I think Catholicism is surging in Africa, and why it used to surge in America:

African: What Is

- **Charity with evangelization:** The New Evangelization in Africa, reminiscent of the early Christians, appeals to the whole person. There, the mission of saving souls is not limited to presentations, bible studies, and faith formation programs. When corporeal works of mercy are added to evangelization, conversions follow. In other words, when people are fed, clothed, visited, taught Christian parenting skills or trained on how to look for a job, they will listen to what you have to say about God.
- **The supernatural:** Catholics in Africa are unapologetically open to the supernatural. Answered prayers, healings, miracles and even exorcisms are not medieval relics to them as they are to many Westerners.



For them, the presence of God is a living reality as is the presence of evil. They have yet to be tainted by a kind of modern skepticism that treats the supernatural as primitive.

America: What Was

- Sign of contradiction: Our Catholic ancestors in America were unafraid to stand out against the cultural mainstream. Like the early Christians, they had a world-renouncing spirit about them. They took it for granted that to save the world, they had to be set apart from the world. In order to make this a reality, clergy and laity had to be mindful of moral and spiritual dangers which undermined the Gospel. As such, they put into effect safeguards that worked. Yet, as St. Paul counseled St. Titus, Catholics were opened to every good enterprise. They affirmed the good where it existed but they were never compelled to ignore evil in the name of being positive.
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- Missionary spirit: In years past, Catholics in America were of the mindset that they had something special to offer; that God's redemptive work through the Church was singularly privileged. A nineteenth century priest by the name of Fr. Thomas Jenkins said the following in 1886: "To be truly Catholic one's faith must be as exclusive as his charity is universal." That is, just as we are obligated to love everyone *without* distinction, we are equally obligated to profess and pass on a faith that God has given to us as a gift *without* compromise and accommodation. Historically, the exclusivity of faith and the universality of love spawned an intense missionary spirit within the Church. New York archbishop John Hughes (1842-1864) was a product of this. He said, "Everybody should know that we have for our mission to convert the world- including the inhabitants of the United States- the people of the cities, and the people of the country, the Officers of the Navy and the Marines, the commander of the Army, the legislatures, the Senate, the Cabinet, the President and all."