December 29, 2008

DIVINE RECRUITS

In America for Job, an African Priest Finds a Home

By LAURIE GOODSTEIN

OAK GROVE, Ky. — The Rev. Chrispin Oneko, hanging up his vestments after leading one of his first Sunday Masses at his new American parish, was feeling content until he discovered several small notes left by his parishioners.

The notes, all anonymous, conveyed the same message: Father, please make your homilies shorter. One said that even five minutes was too long for a mother with children.

At home in Kenya, Father Oneko had preached to rural Africans who walked for hours to get to church and would have been disappointed if the sermons were brief.

“Here the whole Mass is one hour,” he said, a broad smile on his round face. “That was a homework for me, to learn to summarize everything and make the homily 10 minutes, maybe 15. Here, people are on the move very fast.”

Father Oneko is part of a wave of Roman Catholic priests from Africa, Asia and Latin America who have been recruited to fill empty pulpits in parishes across America. They arrive knowing how to celebrate Mass, anoint the sick and baptize babies. But few are prepared for the challenges of being a pastor in America.

Father Oneko, 46, had never counseled parishioners like those he found here at St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church. Many are active-duty or retired military families coping with debt, racial prejudice, multiple deployments to war zones and post-traumatic stress disorder. Nor did he have any idea how to lead the multimillion-dollar fund-raising campaign the parishioners had embarked on, hoping to build an octagonal church with a steeple to replace their red brick parish hall.

Cutting his sermons short was, in some ways, the least of Father Oneko’s worries when he arrived here in 2004. He did not understand the African-American experience. He had never dealt with lay people so involved in running their church. And yet, in the end, the families of his church would come to feel an affinity with their gentle new pastor, reaching out to him in his hour of need, just as he had tended to them in theirs.

To the volunteers at St. Michael’s, it was clear that Father Oneko was out of his element in many ways. Marie Lake, the church’s volunteer administrator, and her husband, Fred, often invited him

for dinner.

“My husband was driving him down 41A and there was a big old statue of Uncle Sam,” said Mrs. Lake, who owns an accounting business and keeps the church’s books. “He thought it was Sam from Sam’s Club wholesale.”

To help him along, the Lakes gave Father Oneko a high school textbook on American history and government.

“Many years ago we sent our missionaries to Africa, and now they’re sending missionaries here,” Mrs. Lake said. “It’s strange how that goes.”

In this largely rural, largely white area of Western Kentucky, the Rev. Darrell Venters, who is in charge of recruiting priests for the Diocese of Owensboro, knew that some of his parishes would never accept Father Oneko, who is short, stout and very dark-skinned.

But Father Venters thought that Father Oneko and St. Michael’s, a parish on the outskirts of a big military base, with its racial mix and many families who had lived abroad, was a good bet.

“We knew if any parish would accept him, it would be this one,” Father Venters said.

Inspired to Serve

When Father Oneko was growing up, the priest in his Roman Catholic parish was an American who spoke the native Luo language and was beloved by the villagers. He showed the children home movies of his parents and his seminary back in America.

“He inspired me,” Father Oneko said. “He was able to speak my language better than anybody I have known. It really interested me, the way I saw him praying the rosary every day. I just admired to be like him.”

In Kenya, Father Oneko became the sole pastor for 12 satellite parishes in an 80-mile stretch. He served more than 3,000 people communion on a typical weekend and ran a girls high school.

It was a hardship post. His car, the only one in the vicinity, was used as a school bus, an ambulance and, if the local officers caught a thief, a police car — with Father Oneko the driver.

When his bishop asked for volunteers to serve in a diocese in Jamaica that badly needed priests, Father Oneko put up his hand. He wanted a new challenge, and being a missionary suited his vision of serving the church.

He found conditions in Jamaica even more desperate than in Kenya. Violence was so common that thugs had killed a priest at the altar.

“The rats in the rectory ate my clothes,” he said. “I got a baby kitten to hunt the rats, but the kitten was eaten by hungry dogs.”

Father Oneko lasted nearly five years as pastor of five churches in Jamaica. But after so much time in hardship posts, he wanted to taste life in a developed country. He sent letters of introduction to dioceses in the United States.

He received offers from two American dioceses. He knew nothing about the Diocese of Owensboro, but picked it because he felt some affinity with its name.

“Our names start with O,” he explained. “So I was so much interested in this place that starts with O.”

Priests must have permission to leave their own dioceses, and some bishops are reluctant to let their priests go, especially if their parishes are understaffed.

In fact, the flow of priests from the developing world to Europe and the United States amounts to a brain drain: most of those developing countries have far fewer priests in proportion to Roman Catholics than the United States does. Father Oneko’s situation in Kenya, serving 12 parishes simultaneously, was not unusual.

But Father Oneko’s bishop at the time, Archbishop John Njenga of Mombasa, said he was receptive to the pleas of the bishops in Jamaica and the United States. He had traveled to Germany and seen parishes closed for lack of priests.

“The Lord will reward us for our generosity, for letting men go out there,” said Archbishop Njenga, who is now retired.

Father Oneko arrived at St. Michael’s on the heels of a Nigerian priest who had been helping out temporarily. Father Oneko said he was unnerved to hear that the Nigerian had not been a resounding success. Parishioners complained that they could not understand his accent. An American pastor said the Nigerian had seemed overly interested in material goods. When an ophthalmologist offered to fit him for glasses at no charge, he asked for three pairs.

But parishioners soon noticed that Father Oneko was different. He listened and won people over with his humility. Where the Nigerian priest had taught the choir to sing African hymns, Father Oneko did not try to impose his worship style. And he learned to keep his sermons to no more than 15 minutes and the Masses to one hour.

One Sunday, after he opened his homily with a joke that fell flat, he said, “I know some of you are looking at your watches, so I’ll make it brief.”

He preached slowly, in his Kenyan accent: “Late us prrray.” Sometimes he spelled out words when he saw the congregation looking puzzled. “B-I-R-D, not B-E-D,” he said.

He did not tell the parishioners that in Kenya and Jamaica, he had been a charismatic Catholic, participating in faith healings and leading Masses with spirited singing and clapping that lasted for hours.

In Kentucky, he stuck to the music the congregation was used to. At the Saturday evening Mass, that meant a faint choir of three voices; at the 11:30 a.m. Sunday Mass, an extended family of Filipinos played guitar and piano.

Some afternoons, the church's deacon, Jack Cheasty, would see Father Oneko sitting alone at the piano in a corner of the church, quietly playing the upbeat charismatic hymns he loved. "He's cautious to do anything that might be divisive," Deacon Cheasty said, "and that's one of his strengths."

Tending the Flock

Father Oneko drove slowly out of the church parking lot one day in his Ford Taurus with a bumper sticker that said, "The Holy Priesthood: Called, Consecrated, Sent." He was making house calls, giving communion to three parishioners too ill to come to church.

At the first house, he was offered a seat in an armchair, but instead he chose to sit on a rumpled couch next to his ailing parishioner, SunI Robbins, so frail from lung cancer she could barely sit up. She opened trembling hands to receive the eucharist.

"Don't lose hope," Father Oneko said gently, "because we all love you. Mr. Robbins loves you. The whole church, we are all praying for you. Just trust in God's mercy and love." (Mrs. Robbins has since died.)

Driving well under the speed limit, as is his habit, he said that Africans were far more accustomed to death — and premature death — than Americans. In Kenya, he said, so many parents were used to having children die. In Africa, he said, "We just accept it."

He drove into the countryside to the home of one of the church's founding members, Shirley Korman. In the yard, Mrs. Korman's son was stalking small game with a rifle. Inside, the house was decorated with large framed prints of Civil War battle scenes.

Mrs. Korman, a retired nurse who has congestive heart failure, sat in a glider rocker, a red wig setting off her pale skin. She said that when her husband died, Father Oneko had comforted her and led a moving funeral.

"Father Chrispin," she said, "if you're still here in Kentucky, I want you to come and do my funeral."

His answer was gentle: "I hope to still see more of you, but if it happens, I will fulfill your request."

On the way out, after passing a portrait of Robert E. Lee, Father Oneko spied a statue of a guardian angel on the kitchen table. The angel was a beautiful woman in flowing robes, and she was black.

"I haven't seen one like that before!" Father Oneko exclaimed, delighted.

That night, he settled at a table at a Mexican restaurant filled with soldiers in uniform and their families, where he discovered to his satisfaction that sizzling fajitas tasted a lot like the grilled meat

he missed from Kenya. He said that although he saw himself as a missionary, he did not think he was actually spreading the faith in Kentucky.

“People already know their faith,” he said. “Mine is only to help them. I’m not planting any new faith here. Mine is only to water it.”

He confessed that he had an easier time relating to white Americans than African-Americans because he did not understand why blacks carried such resentments toward the United States.

“Their ancestors are long gone,” he said. “They are bitter for I don’t know what.”

He has little tolerance for what he sees as unnecessary self-pity. When an unemployed Vietnam veteran told him he blamed his war experience for his poverty, Father Oneko said he told him: “I blame you, because military people have so many opportunities. You are getting some pension from the government, so you should not complain.

“There are some poor people, poorer than you, somewhere, in Africa, in Jamaica,” Father Oneko said. “But you, at least you have freedom. You have somewhere to sleep.”

‘Part of the Family’

One morning in January, Father Oneko received a phone call from his family in Kenya, where a disputed presidential election had just set off a wave of intertribal anger and violence.

A mob had set fire to his parents’ house because they had given shelter to a family of a rival tribe the mob was chasing. Father Oneko’s 32-year-old brother, Vincent Oloo, arrived in time to help their elderly parents escape the burning house. But the mob turned on Father Oneko’s brother, shooting him dead. He left a wife and three children.

“My parents were just crying and crying,” Father Oneko said. “My father is crying and saying, ‘Now I’m losing all the children, who will bury me?’ ”

Father Oneko phoned his friend the Rev. John Thomas and then Mrs. Lake, his faithful volunteer administrator. She was stunned at the news, and for half an hour listened to and consoled her priest — a sudden role reversal. Father Oneko was troubled to hear his mother wailing on the phone and to know that he could not go to Kenya to perform the funeral. His parents insisted it was too dangerous for him to come.

Mrs. Lake called three of the church’s Silver Angels, a club of elders. They phoned more church members, and in two hours 60 people had assembled at a special noon Mass in memory of Father Oneko’s brother.

At the end of the Mass, they lined up in the center aisle as if for communion, and Father Oneko stood at the front receiving their embraces one by one.

He was overwhelmed by the outpouring of sympathy. Children in the parish school in Hopkinsville made him cards; one showed his brother with a halo, in the clouds. The bishop and priests of the

diocese e-mailed and phoned their condolences. St. Michael's and the parish in Hopkinsville took up a special collection for his family that totaled $5,600.

"It seems the whole church is praying with me," Father Oneko said a few days later, as he read through the children's cards. "You feel like you're not a foreigner, just a part of the family. It makes me know how much I am to them."

Bidding Farewell

In June, after four years at St. Michael's, Father Oneko was transferred as part of a routine reshuffling of priests in the diocese. When he told the worshipers at the 11:30 Sunday Mass about the transfer, some cried. Several told him they would leave the church.

He said: "Don't come to the church because of me. Come because of God."

He insisted he did not want a big goodbye party because he was afraid he would cry. Still, he was showered with gifts: calling cards; a white chasuble from the Silver Angels, hemmed for his short frame; a $1,500 check from the parish for his coming trip to see his family in Kenya; and from Mrs. Korman, a replica of the black angel he had seen on her kitchen table.

He was leaving the parish no more and no less healthy than he had found it. Attendance still fluctuated from 300 to 450 on a weekend — lower in summer and during troop mobilizations.

The campaign to raise money for the new church was still under way. But as a temporary measure, the parishioners had replaced the stacking chairs with wooden pews and built an arched altar, so the old recreation hall looked more like a real church.

At his last set of three weekend Masses, Father Oneko began his homily with a rambling African story about a hyena, a monkey and a tortoise. At the punch lines, no one in the first two Masses laughed. By the third, he had the timing down better and some chuckled. The story was about being grateful, and he spent the next 20 minutes thanking everyone he could think of by name. The homily lasted 35 minutes.

In one of his last acts, he baptized an 11-month-old baby. With the sun streaming in, the baby, Hope Charity Banse, looked like a porcelain doll in her white christening gown.

The baby's mother, Jennifer Banse, had been waiting for this moment for months. Her husband had just returned from Iraq, in time for Father Oneko to perform the baptism before he transferred. In her husband's absence, Father Oneko had been a comfort.

Hope rested her head on her mother's shoulder, then stretched her hand toward the African priest, more familiar to her than her own father. "Hope Charity," Father Oneko said, "the Christian community welcomes you with great joy."

Tuesday: An exporter of priests.