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DEEPENING THE CATHOLIC CHRISTIAN FAITH IN A PROLIFIC RELIGIOUS ENVIRONMENT: A CASESTUDY OF SPIRITAN MISSION IN MBEYA



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Introduction

The ancient definition of man as “*animal religiosum*” (religious animal) which was well captured in Porphyry’s *Isagoge*, the well-known introduction to Aristotle’s *Organon*, remains true to date. This must not be viewed negatively hence man is, arguably, incurably religious. The manifest wonders of creation in his environment, the crises of life, the reality of death and the questions of afterlife all contribute to the claim or fact above. The seeming confusion is the sometimes opposing ideas and differences in religious beliefs and practices among religious people. For example, before/during the time of Jesus there were various Jewish groups such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and the Zealots. They differed in their beliefs and practices though with some similarities.

The proliferation of the human environment with religious beliefs and practices was highly pronounced even during the missionary days of St. Paul. One remembers Paul’s uneasy experience in Athens sighting a city full of idols (cf. Acts 17:16-34). His earnest effort to plant Christ in people brought him attacks both physically and spiritually. The case is not different with Africa. Despite the many centuries of gospel evangelization in Africa, some of us are still Christians of external conformism with little faith. This explains the reason why fetishism is still pronounced among us vis-à-vis the number of Christian churches on ground. While Catholic Church remains on top (as a denomination) among recognized Christian creeds, the faith condition of a sizeable number of her adherents especially in Mbeya gives rise to the question of deepening of faith. This article therefore takes the Catholic archdiocese of Mbeya Tanzania as a case study.

About the Catholic Archdiocese of Mbeya

Mbeya is made up of such tribes as *Nyakiusa*, *Safwa*, *Ndali*, *Nyamwanga*, *Kimbu*, *Malila*, with other minor tribes such as *Kinga*, *Bungu* and *Nyiha*. The population is approximately two million together with



Songwe as a region. Funny enough, there is a claim that after Nigeria as a country, in terms of highest number of Pentecostal churches in Africa, Mbeya as a region ranks second. Nevertheless, in spite of the leading number of Christians in Mbeya over other religions, it is argued that a good number of them still remain dual worshippers as they practise both Christian and traditional religions. Their traditional practices, which is tagged by some persons as “fetishism” and “paganism” are evident in their use of charms in businesses, healing system, witchcraft, burial rites, and traditional fortification for protection against enemies and so on. I got my first shock during the burial of one parishioner two years ago. After lowering the corpse into the grave, before I could complete the burial rituals, I was asked to wait for the traditional men to carry out their invocations and rituals inside the grave before covering the grave. I could not prevent them from turning the corpse sideways as their tradition demands. I did ask myself: “Is it Catholic or traditional burial?” That was the reality and this is where we are.

Spiritan Mission in Mbeya

Spiritan presence in Mbeya started with the presence of a Dutch Spiritan Fr Theodorus Slaats. He was said to have been invited by the then Bishop James Sangu to the Diocese of Mbeya. During the early period of his arrival in Mbeya, he did little or nothing to identify himself as a *Spiritan* for reasons best known to him. Later on, in the year 2003 he was opportune to start the Holy Spirit parish Ruanda a then out station of Mwanjelwa parish. Nevertheless, towards the latter days of his mission, he did officially request for Spiritan presence in Mbeya. The then East African Provincial Superior Fr Evarist Shayo sent a *Confrère*, Fr Ricklan Stephen Mallya, to work with him in 2006. This brought to limelight the unique identity of *Spiritans* as a Congregation in Mbeya.

The question of expansion came at a time when the latter (now late) Bishop Evarist Chengula IMC requested the Province to take up another parish in Mbeya. The prompt response of the same Provincial Superior brought in the person of Fr Peter Mallya as the *Spiritan* pioneer missionary in St. Joseph the Worker parish Igoma in 2008. This parish was formally under the charge of the Carmelites but given back to the Diocese due to lack of personnel. With due permission from the Bishop and directed by the Provincial, Fr. Peter Mallya quickly started the *postulancy* there. Within a period of three years he handed the formation work over to Fr Jude Ifezime during whose time the *Postulancy* was relocated to Bagamoyo for proximity sake few years later.

In the year 2014, the then outstation of the Holy Spirit parish Ruanda in Ilomba was made a parish by Bishop Chengula with Fr. Peter Mambo as its maiden parish Priest. Given the status of Ilomba as a parish, *Spiritans* now work in three parishes in the archdiocese of Mbeya. From the onset till now, a number of Spiritan Confrères have come and gone in the parishes involved. It might interest you to know that there is an ongoing process to finalize a contract with the archdiocese of Mbeya in order to stabilize our mission here.

Spiritan Apostolate in Mbeya

Our apostolate is majorly pastoral in the parishes aforementioned. However, we are gradually promoting Spiritan vocation in the archdiocese. Today we can boast of having about six professed Spiritans from this zone. There are some others at the level of Philosophy and *Postulancy*.

Pastoral Challenges (The experience in Ilomba)

Generally, Mbeya is highly infested with mixed beliefs and practices which involve Christianity, Islam and traditional religions. Traditional beliefs and practices are so dominant that they affect both Christians and Muslims. The question of the position of traditional Chiefs and the high level of witchcraft in the area

pose challenges to many people up to date. Our parishes are filled with people who could be described as being challenged and sometimes harassed due to the perturbing spiritual atmosphere in which they found themselves. The decrying level of faith challenge I saw in most Catholics since my arrival at Ilomba parish in 2020 warranted my going into special ministry of counselling, prayer, healing and deliverance. This ministry has witnessed a large turnout of not only Catholics from different parishes but Christians of other Churches and Muslims as well. Many of them narrate how much they have suffered in the hands of the witchdoctors and ‘unfriendly’ neighbours.

With my encounter so far with many people during my office days, I have the following observations to make among others:

1. That the faith of many Catholics in Mbeya has many spiritual challenges arising from the environment, and as such their spirituality needs regular and closer guidance from their Priests
2. That many people seem to believe more in the efficacy of traditional powers than in God’s protection
3. That some of them seem to lack (maybe not basic but) strong Catholic Christian faith foundation
4. That there is somewhat attitude of running easily to the witchdoctors or Pentecostal churches in times of spiritual challenges
5. There is some level of spiritual manipulation in the neighbourhoods and in business places
6. There are several cases of some Catholics trying to escape with the Holy Communion in hands. This has been observed mostly with old women. What they intend doing with it afterwards is another question.
7. The witch doctors could be said to be making some wealth from our Christians and are feared to be challenged even when their fraudulent activities are discovered. Some of our Christians are willing to pay the charges of the witchdoctors but financially contribute too little or with difficulties in Churches.
8. The question of protecting family members traditionally is common. This is to say that people invite or go to witchdoctors to fortify themselves against external attacks. This could be found in five out of every ten families.
9. The rate of cohabitation championed by the men is very common

These habits pose some challenges to pastoral ministry but at the same time provide the Priests with pastoral works to be engaged with. At first sight, with the vibrancy in singing at Masses, one may be carried away presuming that the gospel has already got rooted in them. But a closer encounter with them reveals the true situation as it is and the need for more pastoral commitment.

Deepening the Catholic Christian Faith

To deepen the Catholic Christian faith among Christians in Mbeya, basic and deep Christian foundations must not be taken for granted. The inculcation of the doctrine ought not to be left for their Catechists to handle for there may not be much difference between them and their people. The Priest need to keep an eye on what goes on and should commit himself to authentic witnessing of the Gospel beyond the celebration of the Eucharist and other Sacraments. There is still a need to teach the Bible, and give more teachings on the efficacy of the Sacramental like the use of Holy Water and others.

Notably, the high presence of Pentecostal Churches in Mbeya makes it more important to allow pious societies like the Charismatic and others to function in our parishes with proper training and guidance by



the Priest who ought to be properly disposed and experienced in this aspect. Stopping them from functioning or being far away from them might make issues worse hence the Pentecostals are experts in hunting our Catholics. Experimentally, bringing more life into our traditional way of Eucharistic adoration might go a long way to nourishing the spiritual life of the people the more. Our creativity can help us make what we have more interesting and more viable (in reference to Eucharistic adoration). And sometimes, we may need to tolerate and not be antagonistic to suitable adoration songs that may not be customary or original to us. What ought to be considered is the content/meaning/theology of the song and not its origin. If it is suitable for adoring/praising God and lifts the soul/spirit of the people, why not consider it while making more effort to compose new and more pure Catholic adoration songs with good theology?

Another way of deepening the faith is to organise parish seminars at different seasons of the church and to emphasize attendance. Do not presume that they know or that they are okay. In Ilomba parish, it is now compulsory for godparents and parents to attend seminars before getting their children baptized. This is to ensure that they take proper spiritual responsibility to those children. Emphases and efforts are being made to ensure that adult Catholics identify with one devotional group or the other in the church instead of attending only Sunday Masses as a good of them are used to.

Conclusion

Faith level differs from one person to the other. Where there is weak faith there are also people with amazing faith. A good number of our Catholics in Mbeya are thirsting for God. They, at least, are highly appreciative verbally when they see the true commitment of the Minister to them. In any case, there is a need to personally get closer to the people we are ministering to in order to understand them better in their challenges and needs. This will enable us to update our pastoral strategies and be more effective in the ministries. Our classroom theological studies should be contextual and practical to avoid being counter-productive in the face of reality. Prospective priests who are to carry out ministry in Mbeya ought to be well aware of the demands arising from the challenging situation and prepare themselves spiritually/pastorally beforehand for effective ministry of deepening the faith of the Catholic Christians available. We need to be pragmatic in facing the existential issues confronting our people than presuming that they have solid faith.

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