

Sustaining and Transforming: The Complex Impact of African Clergy and Communities on the Catholic Church in the West

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Abstract

This paper examines the profound transformation of the Catholic Church in North America and Europe, driven by reliance on clergy and communities from Africa. This phenomenon extends beyond a demographic trend to constitute a complex ecclesiological event with multifaceted theological, cultural, and institutional implications. The analysis begins with the historic appointment of the first African-born bishop to lead a U.S. diocese, Bishop Simon Peter Engurait, using this as a focal point to explore the maturation of "reverse mission" from temporary clerical support to embedded leadership. The paper further analyzes the demographic vitality of African Catholic diaspora communities, their practices of liturgical inculturation, and the theological tensions they introduce. Finally, it confronts the systemic challenges, including transnational accountability gaps and ethical questions surrounding clerical migration. To provide comprehensive understanding, the paper incorporates three comparative dimensions: an analysis of diaspora experiences across the U.S., Europe, and Canada; an examination of the crucial but often-overlooked role of women in sustaining these communities; and a focused study on the theological themes emphasized in African homiletics within Western contexts. This tripartite approach reveals that the Western Church faces a dual imperative: to move from a mentality of utilization toward genuine reciprocal partnership, while simultaneously globalizing accountability and safeguarding standards to match its globalized clergy.

Keywords: African Catholicism, Diaspora, Fidei Donum, Reverse Mission, Bishop Simon Peter Engurait, Clerical Shortage, Inculturation, Transnational Accountability, Women in Diaspora, Comparative Ecclesiology, African Homiletics

1. Introduction: A Transformative Moment in Global Catholicism

The 21st-century Catholic Church stands at a demographic and ecclesiological crossroads. While statistical decline characterizes its historic Western heartlands, explosive growth continues across the Global South, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where the Catholic population increased by over 60% between 2000 and 2020 [1]. This statistical reality has evolved into a tangible, daily experience within parishes across North America and Europe. Confronted with a critical shortage of indigenous vocations, Western bishops have increasingly turned to the abundant clerical resources of Africa to sustain sacramental life [2]. What began as a pragmatic response through the fidei donum priest program has matured into a permanent, multifaceted phenomenon reshaping

the Church's liturgical, leadership, and communal landscape in the West.

This transformation is characterized by three interconnected developments: the continued formal importation of clergy through established channels, the organic growth of vibrant and self-sustaining African diaspora communities, and—most significantly—the emergence of African-born leaders within the hierarchical structures of the Western Church itself. The September 2025 ordination of Bishop Simon Peter Engurait, a Ugandan-born priest, to lead the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux in Louisiana, represents a historic inflection point [3]. As the first African-born bishop appointed to lead a diocese in the mainland United States, his installation symbolizes the full integration of

African leadership into the ordinary governance of the American Church, moving the narrative beyond temporary clerical support.

This paper contends that the presence of African clergy and communities constitutes a complex ecclesiological event with profound and sometimes paradoxical implications. It functions simultaneously as an essential structural sustainer, preventing institutional collapse in countless parishes, and as a potent agent of spiritual, theological, and cultural diversification. This generative force, however, exists alongside a shadow dimension involving documented instances of misconduct, transnational accountability failures, and ethical ambiguities in the financial dynamics of clerical exchange. To fully comprehend this reality, a multidimensional analysis is required.

Therefore, this paper will pursue a tripartite investigative structure. First, it will chart the evolution from temporary clerical support to embedded leadership, using the case of Bishop Engurait as paradigmatic. Second, it will analyze the demographic vitality of diaspora communities and their practices of inculturation. Third, it will confront the accompanying challenges of accountability and ethical exchange. Furthermore, to deepen the analysis, this paper incorporates three critical comparative and thematic extensions: (1) a comparison of the African Catholic diaspora experience across the United States, Europe, and Canada; (2) an examination of the indispensable role of women in building and sustaining these communities; and (3) a focused study on the distinctive theological themes prevalent in African homiletics within Western contexts. Through this comprehensive approach, the paper argues that the future vitality of the Western Church depends on navigating this new reality with prophetic responsibility, receptive humility, and a commitment to forging a truly global, accountable, and renewed communion.

1.1. The Evolution of Leadership: From Fidei Donum to Episcopal Authority

The reliance on African clergy has systematically evolved from a short-term solution into a permanent, multi-generational feature of Western Catholicism, culminating in unprecedented levels of institutional leadership integration.

1.2. The Fidei Donum Foundation and Its Ambiguous Economy

The canonical instrument established by Pope Pius XII's 1957 encyclical, *Fidei Donum*, remains a primary conduit for clerical migration. Priests from nations like Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Uganda are formally loaned for renewable terms—typically three to five years—to dioceses in North America and Europe facing dire pastoral shortages [4]. Their assignments are often bifurcated: many serve as cultural shepherds for burgeoning immigrant communities, offering liturgy and sacraments in native languages; others are deployed as general practitioners in rural or suburban parishes with predominantly aging, white congregations, where they become the sole barrier to parish closure or consolidation.

This system has given rise to a complex transnational economy of exchange. The receiving diocese gains sacramental ministry and

pastoral care, while the sending diocese often receives financial remittances—either through formal diocesan support agreements or informal priestly contributions—that fund seminaries, schools, and charitable projects back home [5]. While framed as fraternal solidarity, this dynamic creates a relationship of mutual dependency laced with ethical questions. Does it incentivize sending bishops to "export" vocations for economic gain? Does it represent a just partnership or a new form of ecclesiastical neo-colonialism, where the South provides human capital in exchange for the North's financial capital?

1.3. Endogenous Vocations: The Diaspora Grows Its Own

Crucially, the vocations pipeline is no longer exclusively external. The African diaspora is now generating its own clergy through two distinct, organic pathways:

- **Immigrant Vocations:** Men who arrive in the West for education, work, or family reunification subsequently discern a priestly vocation within their host diocese. Their formation is inherently hybrid, integrating the spiritual and theological sensibilities of their upbringing with the pastoral needs of a secularized Western context.
- **Second-Generation Vocations:** More transformative still is the rising number of sons of first-generation immigrants entering Western seminaries. These men are culturally bilingual, fully socialized into Western society while being deeply rooted in the familial piety and communal faith of their parents' heritage. They represent the mature fruit of the diaspora, poised to become a bridge-building clergy from within, capable of ministering with authenticity to both diaspora communities and the broader Church [6].

1.4. A Historic Breakthrough: The Bishop from Ngora in Louisiana

The most definitive signal of this matured presence is the assumption of ordinary governing authority. The ordination of Bishop Simon Peter Engurait as the sixth bishop of Houma-Thibodaux is a paradigmatic event. Born in Ngora, Uganda, and formerly a civil servant in Kampala, Engurait was not appointed as an auxiliary bishop for ethnic ministry. He was installed as the diocesan bishop—the chief pastor, teacher, and canonical governor for a local church in the deeply Catholic cultural region of South Louisiana [3]. His statement upon appointment, that he was chosen "not from outside, but from among the ranks of the priests of this beloved diocese," is profoundly significant [3]. It underscores a model of leadership that is fully integrated into the local presbyterate and community while being authentically global in origin. This historic appointment moves the phenomenon beyond clerical labor exchange and establishes an irreversible precedent for the normalization of African-born leadership in the highest echelons of the Western episcopacy. It is the most visible institutional manifestation of a truly polycentric global Church, where centers of authority and influence are no longer exclusively aligned with historic Western geographies.

1.5. Transplanted Religious Charisms

Complementing the diocesan clergy are African-founded religious congregations that have established autonomous provinces and missions in the West. Institutes like the Society of St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart (Josephites of Nigeria) and the Missionaries of St. Paul of Nigeria now operate parishes, schools, and chaplaincies across North America and Europe. Their presence institutionalizes distinct African spiritual charisms—often emphasizing community, evangelization, and resilience—within the Western ecclesiastical landscape, offering an alternative to historically European religious orders.

2. Diaspora Vitality, Liturgical Inculturation, and Comparative Contexts

The clerical presence is both rooted in and nourishes a rapidly growing lay diaspora, whose demographic energy and devotional practices stand in stark contrast to prevailing trends in the secularized West.

2.1. Demographic Indicators of Vitality

African Catholic communities consistently demonstrate markers of religious vitality that challenge narratives of universal decline. As illustrated in Table 1, these indicators reveal a cohesive and dynamic model of church life.

Indicator	Manifestation in Diaspora Communities	Contrast with Common Western Trends
Mass Attendance & Participation	Exceptionally high rates; multiple overflowing Sunday Masses in languages like Igbo, French, or Swahili; high involvement in lay ministries.	Declining rates; parish consolidation reducing Mass times; struggle to fill liturgical roles.
Vocational Culture	Strong familial and communal promotion of priestly and religious life; significant numbers of first and second-generation vocations.	Persistent shortage; seminary numbers insufficient for replacement; often seen as counter-cultural.
Financial Stewardship	Robust, culturally emphasized tithing; successful fundraising for church projects and support for home dioceses.	Reliance on aging donor base; struggles with capital campaigns and maintaining facilities.
Devotional Life & Piety	Vibrant, expressive, and public: all-night prayer vigils, elaborate Marian processions, frequent communal rosary, healing services.	Often privatized or intellectualized; diminished communal devotional expression outside Sunday Mass.
Formation & Catechesis	High adult participation in Bible studies and faith-sharing groups; strong emphasis on parental transmission of faith to children.	Declining CCD/PSR enrollment; struggles with adolescent and young adult retention postconfirmation.

Table 1: Indicators of African Catholic Vitality in the Diaspora

2.2. The Dynamics of Liturgical Inculturation

These communities actively engage in a process of liturgical inculturation, negotiating a dynamic tension between integration and distinctiveness. They seek official recognition and physical space within diocesan structures while consciously preserving a liturgical and devotional culture that resists full assimilation into what may be perceived as a tepid or overly intellectualized mainstream. This negotiation produces creative solutions: "parishes within parishes," dedicated ethnic chaplaincies with designated Mass times, or the incorporation of traditional song, dance, and vestment into the Roman rite. This process raises fundamental ecclesiological questions about unity, uniformity, and the legitimate diversity envisioned by the Second Vatican Council's constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.

2.3. Comparative Analysis: The Diaspora in the U.S., Europe, and Canada

The experience of the African Catholic diaspora is not monolithic; it is shaped significantly by the political, social, and ecclesial context of the host nation.

- **The United States:** Characterized by a framework of **multiculturalism** and **voluntary religious affiliation**. African communities often organize as explicit ethnic subgroups (e.g., the Nigerian Catholic Apostolate) within

larger diocesan structures. Their growth is frequently tied to family-based immigration and educational opportunities. The recent appointment of Bishop Engurait represents a unique American milestone in episcopal integration.

- **Europe (e.g., France, UK, Italy):** Often shaped by a legacy of **colonial ties** and patterns of **labor migration**. In more secularized societies like France, African Catholic communities can appear as strikingly vibrant counter-cultural enclaves, sometimes filling historic but empty churches. In the UK, communities from former British colonies (Nigeria, Ghana) have established strong chaplaincy networks. European integration often involves navigating more rigid state-church relationships and pronounced secularist ideologies.
- **Canada:** Presents a hybrid model, with an official policy of **multiculturalism** but within a bilingual (English/French) framework. African Catholic communities, particularly from Francophone nations like Cameroon and DR Congo in Quebec, contribute to the complex religious landscape, often aligning with either Anglophone or Francophone diocesan structures. Canada's points-based immigration system also shapes a diaspora with a high proportion of educated professionals.

This comparative lens reveals that while shared traits of vitality exist, the **political theology of the host nation**—its approach to immigration, religion, and pluralism—profoundly affects how

African Catholic identity is formed, expressed, and integrated.

3. The Indispensable Bridge: The Role of Women in the Diaspora

While clerical narratives dominate discussions of reverse mission, the African Catholic diaspora is fundamentally sustained by the often-invisible labor, leadership, and spirituality of women. Their role is multifaceted and essential.

3.1. Women as Cultural and Catechetical Transmitters

Women are the primary agents of **intergenerational faith transmission**. They are responsible for the "domestic church," teaching prayers, ensuring Sunday Mass attendance, and organizing family devotional practices that connect children to a faith identity rooted in another continent. They often serve as catechists in parish programs, ensuring that catechesis resonates with cultural nuances and values.

3.2. Women as Liturgical and Communal Organizers

Beyond formal roles, women are the backbone of communal life. They organize and lead vibrant **prayer groups** (e.g., Legion of Mary, Charismatic prayer meetings), where much of the community's spiritual nourishment and mutual support occurs. They plan and execute the elaborate social dimensions of liturgical celebrations: cooking for festivals, organizing music and dance for feast days, and managing the complex logistics of funeral rites, which are central events in diaspora communities. This work creates the social cohesion that makes the community a "home away from home."

3.3. Women as Informal Theologians and Pastoral Agents

Through testimonies shared in prayer groups, through their resilience in navigating dual cultural expectations, and through their advocacy for family needs within the parish, women engage in a form of **lived, practical theology**. They articulate an understanding of God's providence, healing, and faithfulness drawn from experience. Furthermore, they often act as **key intermediaries**, connecting newly arrived immigrants to parish resources, assisting with settlement challenges, and advocating for their community's needs with parish priests and diocesan offices. Any analysis of diaspora vitality that omits this foundational layer of women's work presents a fundamentally incomplete picture.

4. Theology from the Pulpit: Distinctive Homiletic Themes in African Preaching

The preaching of African clergy in Western contexts introduces distinctive theological accents that challenge and enrich the host Church's spiritual imagination. This homiletic tradition serves as a direct channel for "reverse mission" at the level of belief and perception.

4.1. A Theology of God's Immediate Providence and Power

In contrast to a theology sometimes perceived in the West as emphasizing God's transcendence or implicit presence in historical processes, African homiletics frequently stresses God's **active, immediate, and tangible intervention** in daily life. Sermons

readily cite personal and communal testimonies of healing, deliverance from danger, and unexpected blessings as proof of God's ongoing action. This fosters a posture of **expectant faith** and counters a mechanistic or secularized worldview.

4.2. The Reality of the Spiritual World

Preaching often assumes and addresses a **cosmology where the spiritual world is intensely real and active**. References to spiritual warfare, the power of intercessory prayer to effect change, and the need for discernment between divine and malevolent spiritual forces are common. This stands in contrast to the post-Enlightenment tendency to demythologize such concepts, and it resonates with a growing Western interest in spirituality beyond institutional religion.

4.3. Communal Identity and Moral Resilience

Drawing from the African philosophical principle of *Ubuntu* ("I am because we are"), preaching strongly emphasizes **communal identity, responsibility, and solidarity**. The Christian is seldom addressed as an isolated believer but as a member of the Body of Christ and the ethnic/faith community. Moral exhortations often link personal holiness to the health and reputation of the community. Furthermore, themes of **resilience, hope, and endurance**—theologically rooted in the Exodus narrative and the Passion—are prominent, offering a powerful witness to congregations in societies marked by anxiety and individualism.

This homiletic tradition can create a fruitful tension. It meets a deep hunger for a God who acts and a faith that transforms, yet it can also puzzle or unsettle listeners formed by more academic, historically-critical, or psychologically-oriented preaching styles. It represents a significant site of theological inculturation and exchange.

5. Confronting the Shadows: Systemic Failures and the Imperative for Global Accountability

The generative and revitalizing dimensions of this phenomenon exist alongside a sobering shadow: the replication of the Church's global crisis of abuse and accountability within the transnational clerical system.

5.1. Documented Cases and Transnational Vulnerabilities

While the vast majority of African clergy serve with dedication, there have been high-profile, devastating exceptions. Cases such as the conviction of a Kenyan priest in Minnesota for sexual misconduct (2020) or the arrest of a Nigerian priest in New Jersey on assault charges (2019) expose critical systemic flaws. The vulnerability is often **transnational in nature**: a priest may be accused in his receiving diocese, only to be recalled by his sending bishop and potentially reassigned to ministry elsewhere without a transparent, canonical process or warning to the new community. This "geographic solution" exports risk and perpetuates harm.

5.2. Root Causes: Imported Accountability Gaps

These failures are frequently traceable to accountability gaps in the priests' home ecclesial cultures, which are inadvertently

transplanted:

- **Intense Clericalism and Deference:** In many African societies, priests command immense, often unquestioned, social and spiritual authority. This culture of deference can stifle critical questioning, discourage victims from reporting, and weaken independent lay-led oversight mechanisms [7].
- **Underdeveloped Safeguarding Structures:** Many sending dioceses lack the independent review boards, professionally staffed victim assistance ministries, and transparent canonical procedures that became standard in the U.S. and parts of Europe post-2002.
- **Formation Deficits:** Seminaries in regions experiencing explosive vocations growth, while strong in spirituality and doctrine, may sometimes provide inadequate psychological screening, formation in human sexuality, and training in professional boundary ethics.
- **The *Fidei Donum* Loophole:** The temporary nature of the assignment can sometimes lead to reduced oversight, with neither sending nor receiving bishop assuming full, long-term responsibility for the priest's formation and conduct.

5.3. The Non-Negotiable Imperative: Globalizing Accountability

The Church cannot globalize the clergy without globalizing accountability and safeguarding to an equally rigorous standard. This creates a moral imperative for receiving churches:

- **Rigorous Vetting and Ongoing Formation:** Dioceses must implement enhanced, culturally sensitive psychological screening and mandatory ongoing formation in boundary ethics for all international clergy.
- **Insisting on Structural Reform:** Western bishops' conferences must use their financial and moral leverage to **actively assist and insist on** the development of robust, independent safeguarding structures in sending dioceses. This is not cultural imperialism but a necessary act of fraternal correction and solidarity.
- **Advocating for Universal Protocols:** There is an urgent need for a globally enforced, transparent protocol between bishops' conferences for sharing disciplinary records and ensuring accused priests are removed from ministry pending investigation, regardless of location.

Confronting this shadow is essential for the integrity of the reverse mission. The gift of clerical manpower must be met with the reciprocal gift of unwavering commitment to transparency, safety, and justice for all the faithful.

6. Synthesis and Ecclesiological Implications: Toward a New Model of Communion

The intertwined realities of vitality, leadership, gendered labor, theological exchange, and systemic failure generate profound tensions that define the current ecclesial moment and point toward necessary futures.

6.1. Core Tensions

- **Sustainment vs. Prophetic Challenge:** African clergy provide essential labor to maintain the sacramental system, yet their presence and the vitality of their communities implicitly critique Western models focused on maintenance and institutional survival. The host Church must decide if it is open to being evangelized by this energy.
- **Integration vs. Distinct Identity:** The case of Bishop Engurait shows full integration into governance. At the parish level, communities navigate preserving a distinctive identity while seeking full belonging. The emerging model is **communion-in-plurality**, not assimilation.
- **Ethical Exchange vs. Neocolonial Dependency:** The financial remittance system must evolve from a dependency model to one of **authentic partnership**, investing in joint formation and sustainable development rather than perpetuating a clerical resource extraction economy.

6.2. A Dual Mandate for the Western Church

The Western Church thus faces a dual, urgent mandate derived from this comprehensive analysis:

- **Embrace Integrated Partnership and Receptive Learning:** This means moving beyond utilization to actively promoting African-descended clergy to leadership (following the Engurait precedent), incorporating the pastoral creativity and theological insights of diaspora communities into mainstream renewal, and being a humble student of their vibrant spirituality.
- **Exercise Prophetic Responsibility and Globalize Accountability:** The receiving Church has a non-negotiable duty to ensure the highest standards of safety. This involves relentless advocacy for and investment in global safeguarding structures, making the protection of the vulnerable a universal norm. It must link partnership directly to progress in transparency and accountability.

7. Conclusion

The African presence in the Western Church has irrevocably moved from the periphery to the center of its future. The historic appointment of Bishop Simon Peter Engurait in Louisiana is not an anomaly but a signpost. It points toward a Church that is polycentric in leadership, diversified in its liturgical and theological expression, and sustained by the often-unseen labor of women. The vibrant, expectant faith of diaspora communities and the distinctive themes of their preaching offer a powerful antidote to spiritual anemia.

However, this promising future is contingent on clear-eyed courage. The same globalized system that brings renewal is also susceptible to the Church's oldest and most destructive failures. Therefore, the path forward must be walked with both feet: one foot firmly planted in **receptive humility**, open to the gifts of the global South; the other foot firmly planted in **prophetic responsibility**, demanding a globalization of justice and accountability to match the globalization of the clergy. Only by embracing this complex,

demanding, and holistic vision can the "reverse mission" fulfill its potential to forge a truly catholic, accountable, and renewed communion for the world.

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