

African clergy celebrate unity, diversity of work in U.S.

CLARK, N.J. – Calling for unity among African missionaries and religious in the United States, a New Jersey pastor welcomed “those worthy ambassadors from the African soil” at the eighth annual convention of the African Conference of Catholic Clergy and Religious in the United States.

“Our work is truly extensive and scattered,” said Father Anselm I. Nwaorgu, pastor of Blessed Sacrament/St. Charles Borromeo Parish in Newark and president of the organization known as ACCCRUS.

“This conference is our trumpet blasting for people to join us in New Jersey,” he added. “This conference demonstrates our care, faith and commitment to our work. It is an expression of our own vision and an expression of our expansive and fruitful missions.”

Held Aug. 2-5 at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Clark, the national gathering of African missionaries and religious, which celebrated a welcoming spirit of openness, unity and diversity, featured keynote presentations by Auxiliary Bishop Joseph N. Perry of Chicago, episcopal liaison to the African apostolate, and Bishop Martin Munyanyi of Gweru, Zimbabwe.

Auxiliary Bishop Edgar M. da Cunha of Newark, who provided the opening address at the event, made it clear to the religious from Africa that they were welcome.

“It is not enough to say that you are welcomed, but to make you all feel welcomed,” Bishop da Cunha said. “You serve and offer your gifts to the archdiocese. Years ago, Americans and Europeans went to Africa to spread the Gospel and Africa welcomed the missionaries. Today the roles are reversed and the African Catholics continue to evangelize in America.”

In an increasingly diverse archdiocese, Bishop da Cunha cited the Bible as a reference on how to welcome others. “The presence of brothers and sisters from different cultures should be celebrated as gifts to the church. Jesus said, ‘I was a stranger and you welcomed me.’ The church cannot afford to be unwelcoming; it is un-Christian and against our Gospel. We are a nation and a church of immigrants.”

Bishop da Cunha said ACCCRUS “represents the universality and Catholicism of the church. We are all God’s children and (the African missionaries and religious) bring

new energy to our charge.”

When people feel welcome in both a new country and in a parish, they will be more likely to return, the bishop said. “Pope John Paul II said that the church is not foreign to anyone, anywhere. The simple, grace-filled kindness of parishioners is the first step to welcoming those from other countries.

“Immigrants are helping revive the church,” he added. “We must have respect for cultural diversity and promote an authentic culture of welcome; tolerance is not enough.”

Father Nwaorgu, ACCCRUS president for the past three years, said he had seen many changes in the organization. “We called for a more formal structure in 2003. Being president has been both challenging and rewarding. There has been much increase of religious joining the convention over the past three years. ... However, the work to be done remains enormous.”

Challenges faced by the conference include forming more chapters throughout America, ratifying a constitution for the organization and finding ways to become a resource for U.S. bishops.