

French-speaking Catholics find solace in Mass

ALEXANDRIA, Va. – They greet each other as family inside the small chapel at Bishop Ireton High School in Alexandria, with warm hugs, a “Comment ça va?” and three kisses on alternating cheeks.

Every Sunday at 10 a.m. a small community of French-speaking Catholics gathers to worship as one in their native tongue.

Ireton’s chapel with its wooden pews and long stained-glass windows provides a haven for this group, which is mostly made up of Africans from French-speaking countries such as the Republic of Congo, Ghana, the Ivory Coast and Togo.

Though many of those attending the French-language Mass are registered at local parishes, it is clear the gathering at the chapel is their “church.” The native African dress worn by some, the rhythmic music and the use of African dialects during the Liturgy of the Eucharist bring a taste of home to these displaced faithful.

“It reminds me of my childhood,” said Nita Evele, who moved to the United States from Congo 10 years ago. “We all were Catholic and we went to Catholic school. It just reminds you of so much back home and you feel at home.”

Father Jean-Claude Atusameso, in residence at St. Mary Church in Alexandria, said the weekly French Mass, which is part of the diocesan French ministry effort, meets a big need in the diocese.

The homily, readings and some songs are in French, but prayers and other songs are in local African dialects “because it is our way of expressing our faith,” said Father Atusameso, who began organizing weekly Masses and regular times for confession last May.

Despite the universality of the church, it is the need for this expression of faith that draws Catholics, whether French, Mexican, Filipino, Korean or Vietnamese, to Mass in the language in which they say they can best communicate with God.

“It is much better for me to pray in French,” said Theresa Kinsala, a native of Congo who has been attending the French Mass since its inception. “I have better communication with God. God understands all languages ... but (praying in French) is better for my spirit.”

Raphael Bibanda Mpanu Mpanu and his wife, Germaine, both from Congo, agreed.

To communicate with God, “I must speak in French. It’s my mother language,” he told the Arlington Catholic Herald, newspaper of the Arlington Diocese.

Speaking in French, his wife said she prays well and understands the words of God in her language.

Getting together with other Africans – whom she called her family – is another reason why she attends the weekly Mass. She finds the same ambience she felt in Africa, she said.

Father Atusameso said he believes that the French ministry will begin to flourish as it becomes more widely known. And not only African French-speaking Catholics may attend. In fact, Jolie Kimbunda said the congregation is going to start reaching out to others to join in the special worship – “not just Congolese, but people from different countries that speak French.”

Father Atusameso even invited non-French speaking Catholics to the liturgy, offering to provide volunteer translators.

He called the diocesan French ministry a “wonderful gift the diocese has given to all these people” who “were in need of praying in French.”