

Tuesday
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LIFESTYLE

Catholic Church where people of all faiths seek divine power over diseases and evil



Fr Anthony Parankimalil, who leads worship at the Vincentian Prayer House in Nairobi. Photo/ANTHONY NJORGE

By MWAURA NDUNG'U
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On a Saturday afternoon, under a mabati canopy in a compound on Amboseli Road in Lavington, Nairobi, masses of people gather to sing and dance in a manner so exuberant one might think pentacostal worship is underway.

But the beaming ushers holding rosaries and the display of catechisms for sale hint at the Roman Catholic church.

Welcome to the Vincentian Prayer House where Catholics, Protestants, Hindus, Muslims and even atheists gather to seek divine intervention on various problems in their lives or to quench their spiritual thirst under the guidance of Catholic priests from India.

As the singing dies down, a priest in a white robe proclaims loudly that Jesus is aware of all sicknesses, sorrows and pains and, as the Bible says in Jeremiah 33:3, is available to answer all calls. Tears of joy flow from the eyes of those who believe their illnesses will be healed as others break into dance.

Monthly retreats

The Vincentian Fathers attract many people to their monthly retreats and daily prayer services.

Father Anthony Parankimalil VC, the director of the Vincentian Prayer House in Nairobi, says theirs is an evangelisation ministry which welcomes all people irrespective of their religion, caste, tribe or faith.

Are they part of the charismatic movement?

“We welcome even the atheists to know the love of God, and we minister through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit whereas the charismatic movement is for renewal within the Catholic Church.”

Nairobi’s Vincentian Prayer House belongs to the Vincentian Congregation which was founded in Kerala, India, on November 20, 1904 by Fr Varkey Kattatath.

It is based on the Common Rules of St Vincent de Paul, who is commonly known as the father of the poor because he preached to them in accordance with Luke 4:18 in which Jesus proclaimed: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor.”

According to Fr Anthony, the congregation has spread all over India and abroad to 15 countries including Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. There are 430 Vincentian priests.

In Kenya, the congregation is under the Archdiocese of Nairobi. Their prayer house was built in 2001 on the edge of Kawangware.

Grow in faith

Fr Anthony said their mission has two dimensions: to preach to the non-Christians so that they may be brought to the Christian faith and to Christians to help them grow in faith.

The Very Rev Fr Vincent Rathappillil VC is the regional superior of the Vincentian Fathers in East Africa. He is also the superior of the Vincentian Prayer House. The administrator of the prayer house, Fr Raphael Karalathukaran VC, is also actively involved in the ministry.

The prayer house has more than 200 members.

Father Joshy Kochukudiattil VC, the director of Tabor Retreat Centre in Mumbai, who visited Nairobi recently, said their congregation should not be thought to have broken with the traditional Catholic way of praying.

Scripture readings

Within the fixed structure of the Roman Catholic church, the Mass takes a common path: The scripture readings, the antiphons sung or recited during the entrance procession or communion, and the texts of the three prayers known as the collect, the prayer over the gifts, and the post-communion prayer (they vary each day according to the liturgical season), the feast days of titles or events in the life of Christ, the feast days and commemorations of the saints, or for Masses for particular circumstances.

But the Vincentian Fathers say that there is much more that is not commonly practised.

“The Catholic church has a very rich tradition beyond what we may have seen. Eucharistic prayer is the centre of the Catholic faith, but it also has charismatic, meditative, liturgical, devotional and vocal prayers.

“Jesus, being a person with many different charisms (gifts of grace), the Catholic church also has many different congregations and organisations with very different charisms. We are not able to follow all of them, but only one means used by the Lord, that is, evangelisation.”

Fr. Joshy pointed out that the Vincentian Fathers follow the specific instruction of Christ as written in Matthew 28: 19-20: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I’ve commanded you.”

He said in India, a predominantly Hindu country with a Muslim minority, about 4,000 non-Christians in Mumbai attend services at the Tabor Retreat Centre designed especially for them.

At the centre in Nairobi, people come from all over Kenya to attend the prayer services held every day but Sunday to give the priests a break and to allow people to attend services at their churches.

But Saturday is the main day when throngs converge on the compound for the Eucharistic adoration.

A priest leads the congregation in prayer, calling on them to repent their sins and forgive their enemies unconditionally.

After the prayer session, those who believe they have been “touched” by the Lord join the long queue to the pulpit to testify. Only a few get the chance, but they are cheered and applauded.

Why do some people say they have been healed of their illnesses while others go home without their miracle?

“It is the Lord who chooses whom to heal and when,” Fr Anthony says. “Those who come in full faith and have forgiven their enemies can expect the intervention of the Lord, and they have to receive the inner healing before they open themselves up for spiritual and physical healing.”

But many congregants still line up to seek the priest’s personal intervention, and he gives them a prescription from the Holy Scriptures.

Although the Vincentian Fathers do not advertise, their monthly retreats at their prayer house and the University of Nairobi are always full houses.

And now, for the first time, the congregation will hold a Bible convention at Nairobi’s Uhuru Park from July 21 to July 25 conducted by the two priests and the Rt Rev David Kamau, the auxiliary bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Nairobi.

Hundreds of believers have posted testimonies at www.vphnairobi.org, the congregation’s web site.

Living proof

Pamela Mandela, a human anatomy lecturer at the University of Nairobi’s Chiromo campus, says she is living proof that everything is possible before God.

Dr Mandela says she suffered an attack of TB-meningitis last October which not only threatened her career but also her life. Her condition deteriorated after admission at the MP Shah Hospital.

“It was in January this year when I had lost all hope of living another day that a relative introduced me to Fr Anthony,” she says.

“At first I was hesitant, but my desperation pushed me to grab the opportunity,” says the don who also teaches doctors.

“The priest gave me some scriptures from the Holy Bible to read for a whole month, which I obediently did. Immediately I finished the homework, I attended a five-day retreat at the centre, and Fr Anthony asked those experiencing body weaknesses to stand up. I did not because I was very weak, but he prayed for all of us.”

The following morning, she said, she suddenly gain “miraculous strength” and stood without support.

“I jumped up and down happily, and my relatives could not believe what had happened to me. My doctor could also not believe when I excitedly broke the news to him that I had fully recovered,” she said.

“I had to call my colleagues at the university who had planned to visit me on my death bed that very day. They were amazed to find me in the condition I was before the attack. It is a big miracle that God has given me another chance to live.”

For Agrippine Baraho, a Rwandan refugee, who is a single mother of 14-year-old twin daughters, there is no disease that is incurable to God.

“When I visited Vincentian Prayer House in 2007, I was in my final stage of HIV/Aids. My mission was to ask the priest to pray for my young daughters to get a responsible guardian as I was about to leave them for another world.”

She said she was sceptical at first when the priest asked whether she believed Jesus could heal her.

“He gave me some scriptures to read for a month and also asked me to be attending the Holy Mass every day and ensure I received the Holy Eucharist for a month. I am now well and weigh 73kg,” she said.

Peter Idenya, a widower and father whose two daughters are doctors says he suffered excruciating back pain for five years without a medical solution.

Changed my life

“Funny enough, my doctor advised me to try out prayers for healing and offered herself to bring me to the prayer house,” he said. “I had almost given up when, after attending the service two times without any improvement, my third day there changed my life entirely.”

“As Fr Anthony continued praying for the sick, I felt a strong wave akin to electric shock running from my head to my toes as I sat in my wheelchair. People were praying and loudly calling out to Jesus.

“The priest then asked people to kneel down, and I found myself on my knees which I had not been able to do since I became sick. Everyone, including me, was amazed by the turn of events. I kept jumping around singing for the Lord long after others had taken their seats.

“I am a living testimony there is healing power in the living God as now I am totally healed, and the pain is long gone,” he said.

Another congregant at the Vincentian Prayer House is Catherine Kuria, a career public servant who serves as a director of the Kenya Airports Authority board. She is a Roman Catholic and her daughter had abandoned her faith.

“I kept praying for her to come back to the faith she had been brought up in. After long prayers and attending last month’s Lenten retreat at the Vincentian Prayer House, she told me she had decided to return to her mother church.”

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