

African Mass a taste of home for Edmonton diasporas

Thirteen-year-old Emmanuel Eremionkhale knows one or two words in Esan, and a couple more in Igbo – the Nigerian languages of his father and mother.

He was just four years old when his family immigrated to Canada in 2009. So his chances of understanding his parents' languages or following their traditions seemed slim. But that changed when he joined the choir for the African Mass at St. Dominic Savio Parish in north Edmonton.

"When I sing, languages come to me," Emmanuel said. "It makes me happy."

That's due, in large part, to his father, Lucky Eremionkhale, president of the Nigerian African Catholic Community Association, which brought the African Mass to Edmonton two years ago.



Lucky Eremionkhale, far right, president of the Nigerian African Catholic Community Association, which brought the African Mass to Edmonton two years ago, with his family and friends. Thandi Konguavi, Grandin Media

"We want them to know how Mass is celebrated in Africa," said Eremionkhale, who emigrated with his wife Henrietta, his son Emmanuel and daughter Blessing, now 16.

"We sing and dance, and we want them to enjoy the Mass and at the same time build bonds and develop relationships so we don't lose them to other churches." Since the Second Vatican Council, the landmark gathering in the 1960s that addressed the role of the Catholic Church in the modern world, Catholics around

the world have been encouraged to celebrate Mass in their native languages.

Today, the impact of that change is on full display in Edmonton. Diverse ethnic and linguistic communities say their national Masses are an important part of passing on their language, culture and faith to their children born and raised in Canada.

Every Sunday in the Archdiocese of Edmonton, Mass is celebrated in at least 16 different languages including French, Spanish, Polish, Chinese, Croatian, Portuguese, Vietnamese, Italian, German, Hungarian, Korean, Latin, Sudanese, Malalam – which is spoken in the Indian state of Kerala – and American Sign Language.

The African Mass is held every last Sunday of the month, at 2 p.m. at St. Dominic Savio Parish. When it began in 2016, about 50 people attended. Now, up to 200 people come from parishes across Edmonton and from as far as Fort Saskatchewan for the African Mass every month.

The differences between a typical Canadian Mass and an African Mass, in particular, are stark.



Praise and worship songs are sung in many African languages, including Igbo, Esan, Yoruba, Hausa, and dialects of Zaire, now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Some are sung in English, and the African Mass also retains some Latin, which is still the official language of the Catholic Church. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

An African Mass can get loud. It can run a little long. Praise and worship songs are sung in many African languages, including Igbo, Esan, Yoruba, Hausa, and dialects of Zaire, now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Some are sung in English, and the African Mass also retains some Latin, which is still the official language of the Catholic Church.

The clothing at Mass can be flashy, and you might even find yourself being

embraced by a stranger – but Lucky Eremionkhale and the African Catholic community wouldn't have it any other way.

“As one priest would say, people think we don't clap in the church. We do back home,” he said. “Before you hug anybody or shake anybody here, you need to know the person. But we see ourselves like family, so somebody can hug you and shake you, even if he doesn't know you so well.”

The joy of the African spirit is contagious, and goes beyond a simple handshake when wishing each other peace.

“They celebrate the Mass with song and celebration,” said Mona Podloski, a secretary at St. Dominic Savio Parish. “It's all a celebration – and welcoming – Oh my goodness, you should see the ‘Peace be with you.’ Everyone stands up and hugs each other. It's just really special. You feel really welcomed and at home, and it's a privilege to partake in that Mass.

“Every Mass is a privilege, but to celebrate it culturally is a gift to our parish.”

Fifteen-year-old Heather Mamgodibaye grew up in Chad, a former French colony. She missed the African way of worship when she moved to Canada. That is until she attended Edmonton's African Mass and heard the singing in many African languages including French.

She attends other masses too, even if they are more sedate.

“Back home we enjoyed it more, but I go for the Word of God, even if there is no loud music,” she said.



People attending the African Mass enjoy choir members singing in many African languages, including French, while wear colourful traditional garments. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

Nathalie Mamgodibaye, 18, also grew up in Chad. When she moved to the northeastern Alberta community of Cold Lake in 2013, it was quite a culture shock on many levels, including at church. She was accustomed to a choir and a packed church at Mass, and lots of drumming.

“Cold Lake doesn’t even have a choir,” she said. “The first day I thought, this is not fun.”

That changed when she moved to Edmonton in 2014 and began to attend the African Mass.

Lucky Eremionkhale and other members of the African Catholic community made her feel more a part of the Church and the Mass has given her a chance to wear her colourful African garments – and to remember others back home in prayer.

After the African Mass, the faithful enjoy a potluck fellowship, with traditional food, including Nigerian pounded yam and egusi soup made of melon seeds. Organizers say that sense of togetherness also helps newcomers deal with the challenges of settling in Canada.

Edmonton’s Sudanese Mass at St. Clare Parish is an answered prayer for Deng Ayuel Agar. It’s held every Sunday at 1 p.m. and features singing in Arabic, English and Dinka, Agar’s native language.

It’s a chance to meet – and celebrate Mass – with people from his war-torn home country, some of them even from his hometown of Aweil, in what is now South Sudan.

“In the first days, our numbers were 30 and up, sometimes 40 people,” said Agar, 47. “We were enjoying the church, I was feeling like I’m with my family.”

Attendance at the Sudanese Mass has dropped to about 20 since it began in 2005. Many people have moved to other cities in Canada or back home to South Sudan, which gained its independence from the Republic of Sudan seven years ago.

Nevertheless, the Sudanese Mass is important for Agar and his community, especially for the children.

“We encourage each other to continue meeting, to have Mass together. Our kids, they’re here, and they won’t learn more about what we Sudanese do when they go to school,” he said. “We, as parents, we want them to have our culture because Canada is a multicultural country.”

Celebrating Mass in your own language “brings meaning and understanding,” said Father Andrew Leung, the pastor at St. Clare Parish, who celebrates masses for the Sudanese and Chinese communities.

They also build community with newcomers finding support as they settle in Canada, Leung said.

Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith agrees:

“First of all, it enables people to worship Almighty God in their native tongue, and for that the people are very grateful,” the

Archbishop said. "In addition, it gives beautiful visible expression to the universality of the Church of Christ, and in so doing reminds all of us that we are part of a wondrous mystery much bigger than ourselves, and that the call of God to right worship through union with Christ in his perfect act of worship from the Cross is also universal."



Rev. Paul Kavanagh

Father Paul Kavanagh is director of the Archdiocese's Office of Divine Worship, which helps ethnic communities adapt their cultural elements to the traditional Roman Catholic Mass.

"Some people might love that, they enjoy the contemplative aspect of the Mass, then there are others who when they come to Mass they want to celebrate with their whole being. In some cultures they'll come celebrate Mass and they'll be in there for hours. In a sense, they have found a way where they're not rushing the liturgy and still incorporating elements of their culture within the Mass.

"I've seen some very good elements of enculturation within the Roman rite," Kavanagh added. "I think if it's planned and done well, and doesn't take away from people in prayer, our focus, the main purpose of our worship, is our praise and thanksgiving to God. So anything we do in the liturgy should never take away from that."

All masses must follow the general instructions and prayers of the Roman Missal, which is the guide for celebrating Mass directly from the Holy See.



Bishop Robert Kasun

"If they go off base and start to consecrate Coca-Cola instead of wine, of course there's going to be a problem," said Bishop Robert Kasun, Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Toronto, where Mass is celebrated in 36 languages. "I have not seen anyone going too far."

A former pastor of St. Clare Parish, Kasun strongly encouraged the Sudanese in Edmonton to maintain their language, culture and faith, with some Scripture readings and some of the songs in Dinka. Language, however, is not as important as keeping in mind the focus of the Mass itself.

"Mass is Mass," said Father Gabriel Udeh, who celebrated the African Mass for 11 years until his service in the Edmonton Archdiocese ended in August. "It doesn't depend on the language. If you follow the guidelines for Mass set by Rome, the liturgical regulation, no matter what language you use for celebrating Mass, the Eucharist is the centre of that Mass."



"Mass is Mass," says Father Gabriel Udeh, who celebrated the African Mass for 11 years until his service in the Edmonton Archdiocese ended in August. "It doesn't depend on the language." Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

One of the reasons the African Mass began in Edmonton is that African Catholics saw many of their countrymen joining other denominations whose services were much livelier and familiar.

"The focus is the person of Jesus Christ, who is in the Eucharist, who we are coming to worship, but everybody has their own inclination toward what they used to have back home," said Udeh.

"The core of every Mass is the Eucharist, nobody can change that, you cannot add or subtract. But it is how the music is, how the people participate with the music."

Udeh said the African Mass is important to the Edmonton community, especially beyond the first generation of immigrants. Youth are often reminding their

parents when it's time to attend.

"The younger ones have more interest, they're the ones singing, who are the lectors (readers) in their parish, in the choir, they're coming out now to be involved. That is the part of the Mass I like most because the younger ones, they're the people to hand over the faith to the other generations."

Before 1965, the Mass was celebrated in Latin in every region of the world to feel the universality of the Church. But Bishop Kasun said Mass in many languages doesn't destroy its unity.

"In fact, it highlights the universality of the Church," said Kasun. "There is nothing more beautiful than when you are celebrating a multilingual Mass because you have all the Lord's children from around the world gathered at the table of the Lord. That is a symbol of the great unity of the Church. It is very moving."

For newcomers, celebrating Mass in a language and a culture and with music that is familiar to them gives them a better feeling of being at home, said Kasun.

"If you can't feel at home in the church, where are they going to feel at home?"