

Speech by the African Chaplaincy chairman (Anthony-Claret Onwutalobi)  
on the first Anniversary of the African Catholic chaplaincy Finland.

Introduction

Anniversaries are wonderful, magical, celebratory occasions. May we extend a warm word of welcome to you all at this - our one-year anniversary.

His Lordship Mgr. Teemu Sippo (Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Helsinki)

Very Rev Fr. Rafael Czernia (The parish priest of St. Mary's Catholic church)

Rev Fr. Marco Pasinto (Parish priest of St. Henry's Catholic cathedral)

Our very own Rev Fr. Leonard Wobilla Shwei (The pioneer Chaplain of the African Catholic Chaplaincy)

All the Reverend Fathers and Sisters present

My fellow chaplaincy members and parishioners and our invited guests who have come to worship with us today.

A very good afternoon and warm welcome to each and every one of you who have made it here to celebrate the joyous occasion of the first anniversary of the African Catholic Chaplaincy in Finland. I feel humbled to stand before you at this hour through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, thanking my Lordship Msgr. Sippo, who has given us this opportunity to celebrate.

Today is a special day in our catholic church since we are marking a great event that makes our hearts smile. It has been one year since African Catholic chaplaincy opened its door to the public. The very laudable idea that was nursed, created and blessed by the Bishop of Helsinki, Mgr. Teemu Sippo SCJ in our last year Pentecost celebration, when he made it possible for African immigrants to have the possibility to worship in the cultural identity of their origins without necessarily separating themselves from the universal catholic church.

Upon its creation, the bishop entrusted the newly created chaplaincy to Rev Fr. Leonard Wobilla Shwei as our new chaplain, whose responsibility is to take care of our spiritual needs. One year after, we are indeed proud to tell you today, your lordship that your priest whom you have appointed to take care of this chaplaincy has indeed represented you and the catholic church in Finland well, and has worked hard against all odds to make the chaplaincy what it is today. Indeed, the fatherly virtue of our chaplain Rev. father Leonard has been wonderful, and his commitment has been solid.

Truly, this past year has been a happy and successful year in some many ways for us immigrant Catholics. We have a reason to celebrate God's faithfulness to our parish and our chaplaincy. We've seen and witnessed God's blessings in our lives. The number of African Catholics have increased tremendously. We have grown in the grace of the Lord. Lives have been changed. We've witnessed baptisms, heard testimonies and have witnessed a new outlook to life through the eyes of Christ as Africans. The creation of this chaplaincy has been defined by a display of happy memories, supportive friendships and enduring relationships.

Of course, there have also been some paths that may have been slightly more difficult to travel together. Yet in spite and despite the odd stumbling blocks along the way - we have traveled through yet to this day

- together, supportive, encouraging and enduring. And as we take the time to express our gratitude for a fantastic year gone by - we turn expectantly to the year that lies ahead.

Your Lordship, it may interest you to know that within this one year, the Chaplaincy has grown from strength to strength. Through the wise counsel and strategies of our Chaplain and his team of committee, we have launched an effective evangelical outreach to bring back all the Catholics who have joined different Pentecostal churches on arriving to Finland. Today, we are proud to say that many of our African brethren are now back to their roots. Many of us who were here at the creation of this chaplaincy can testify that we have made a milestone in terms of growth and we can give God glory and honor always.

Just 5 months ago, the African chaplaincy organized their first Christmas carol, it was a very joyous event. Our Kids and the youths were so excited in the event as this was the first time they experience Christmas very close to what they are used to... I remember the positive feedbacks of many of the attendees who participated in the preparation and presentation of their native carol songs and drama. It was a home call.

Our chaplaincy as it known was created on a Pentecost day, powered by the Holy Spirit and this has kept the increasing presence of God amongst us. The chaplaincy has about 45 committee members to support our chaplain in piloting the affairs of chaplaincy. Our focus is primarily centered on building a Sense of Community, advancing our Spirituality, having a true catholic Intellectual Formation and of course with a Liturgy that reflects our cultural experience.

Indeed, the creation of the Chaplaincy has given African immigrant Catholics a new form of possibility to integrate into the Finnish society by worshipping in their own African identity but also as part of the larger Catholic community in Finland and worldwide.

### Our Challenges

Today marks the beginning of another journey whereby we want to know more about the grace of God and move toward the mark and the goal that has been set by our Lord Jesus.

You can agree with me that anniversaries are opportunities for recollections of the year gone by and positive reflections for the year ahead.

As it has been the tradition of my people. We have shared the success stories of this chaplaincy and I would like to draw the attention of our Bishop to some of challenges we are facing, hoping that we will together find a lasting solution in the very near future.

Your Lordship, as the representative of our African Chaplaincy, we have observed that it has been difficult for our Christians to get a conducive environment for counselling with our chaplain. On many occasion, we see Christians on the hall ways trying to get the attention of the priest. This is not a great sight. It will be a great relief on us if an office is created for the African chaplaincy where we can comfortably meet with our chaplain and discuss our spiritual life and life endeavors

Secondly, your lordship, as you know that that we have over 20 countries fully represented in our chaplaincy with diversity of cultures. With these varying cultures comes with its challenges, we are constantly devising means to ensure that all cultures and countries are fully represented. We hope in the future, there will be more vocations to have enough African priests that will help to fully explore our cultural experiences within the catholic church

thirdly, we would also like to draw your attention to the need for a steady means of transportation for the running of chaplaincy activities by our chaplain. Your lordship, there have been so many occasions where Christians have shared concerns that they could not get access of our chaplain specially in matters of urgent spiritual needs. We have seen our chaplain walk long kilometers to attend functions and spiritual needs of our chaplaincy. We therefore request in your clemency that a steady means of transportation be made available to give us a quick access to the priest and assist his priestly mission.

Your lordship, as you know that the African chaplaincy members are also full parishioners of the two parishes in Helsinki (St Mary's Catholic Church and St. Henry Catholic church) and therefore we would like that through your help, open a channel through which we can be allowed to be fully involved in the activities of the parishes and not to be treated as outsiders.

As you have witnessed today; the increasing number of our membership, we are saddled with great difficulties of space both in the church and in the church hall. In the wisdom of the church, we wait patiently to see how we can expand the catholic church and live our faith more profoundly.

Our job is not done yet, as we plan to rescue people's faith from the secularized and damaging societal influences. We therefore continue to work with our chaplain in getting back Christians to our catholic fold.

We can all agree with what the Lord has done unto our lives and we praise Him always for his wonderful love. I am proud to be a member of this family.

We look forward to another wonderful year - a time to build and strengthen forged relationships even further; a time to create and cherish even more shared memories and a time filled with dreams that are brought ever closer and milestones - whatever they may be - achieved.

Ladies and gentlemen may the mercy of the Lord Jesus be upon and take care of you through today and may you enjoy the activities of the day that has been prepared.

Thank you - one and all - for being beside us this one year...and may you be ever near in the years ahead

Let me now welcome the chaplain to give us a word as we begin this day together in the Lord. Rev father Leonard welcome.