



Savannah Serra Club NEWSLETTER

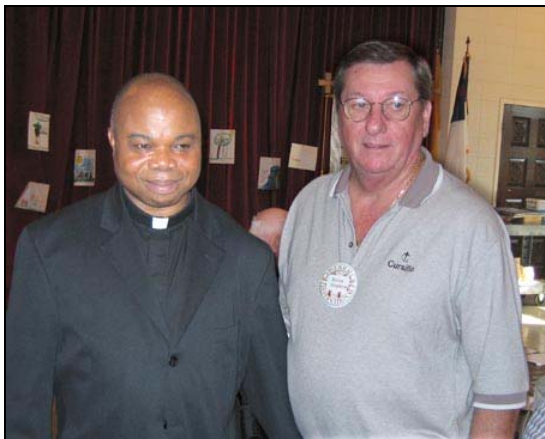
November 2004



Nigeria: “The Vocation Hope of the African Continent.”

Fr. Desmond Ohankwere, Pastor of St. Benedict the Moor Church, spoke to our club at the November meeting. He discussed his calling to the priesthood as well as the vocation climate in Nigeria.

Nigeria is a former British colony and Christianity initially came to the country via the Christian Missionary Society which brought the Church of England. Then the Irish priests came and Catholicism began to take root. Their magic was that they started schools with women religious who inspired everyone. The sisters were a powerful influence on the children and their families. They would say to young boys, “You will be a priest!”



Fr. Desmond with VP Byron Stephens

But the 1967-1970 Civil War had a profound effect on Nigeria. The Irish and other Missionaries left the country, over 1.2 million people died, and there was only one or two indigenous priests left in his Diocese to minister to the 4-6 million Catholics.

Raised by an aunt who was baptized a Catholic just before her death at 102 years old, Fr. Desmond finished his education in a Protestant school after the civil war.

According to African tradition, marrying or becoming a religious is not up to the man and woman alone but rather a matter for the families.

In 1983, he was 28 years old and not married. In fact, he couldn't marry until his older brothers and sister had married before him.

“How did I become a priest in that environment?” asked Fr. Desmond.

He went to work for a textile company and advanced up the ladder to a management position. He hired a new employee for the company and in the course of that experience, the man, impressed with his decency, asked him if he had ever thought about becoming a priest. This touched him very much. Later on the man brought him an application for the seminary.

Although he was still not convinced, Fr. Desmond asked his pastor if he thought he could be a good priest. “Sure,” he said.

He interviewed with the Jesuits, the Dominicans, and finally the Missionary Society of St. Paul, which seemed like a good fit for him.

After that interview, he seriously considered entering the seminary but there was a robbery at the textile company and much property was stolen. This troubled Fr. Desmond very much. He prayed



over this and said to God, "If you want me to become a priest, then catch the thief." Several days later he noticed some of the stolen property in a pawnshop window, reported it to the police, the robbers were caught and everything was recovered.

That was it for him, but it was not that easy. There were still his parents and his obligation to his family to consider. In their culture, the mother holds a dominant position. During his working years, Fr. Desmond would turn over all his wages to his mother and receive an allowance for his expenses. By entering the seminary, the family would be deprived of his contribution. Nevertheless he went ahead, but did not tell them he was entering the seminary. Over the next six years he was able to continue making a financial contribution to the family and they never knew he was studying to become a priest.

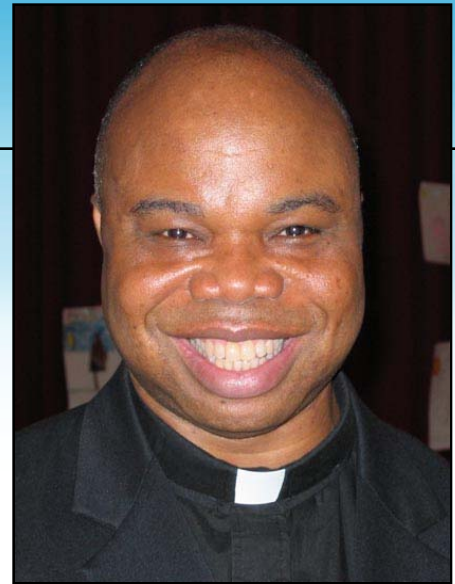
When he finally confronted them he asked his father if he wanted Desmond to bring him honor and respect or money and dishonor? After some thought his father chose the former and at last they accepted his decision.

After the Irish left, the former Archbishop of Onitsha, Francis Arinze, now Cardinal Arinze, was a major contributor to the mobilization of the native clergy, religious, and laity following the civil war. He led the evangelization movement in Nigeria, which doubled the number of Catholics in the country in less than 14 years and strongly encouraged vocations from the family perspective. He and other Bishops in Nigeria placed a mandate on the families and the parish priests to recruit future priests and religious from their parishes. This is now paying off.

There was the sense of self-determination among the people of the Southeast of Nigeria after the Civil War. The Catholic faith was firmly rooted in the people by the Missionaries. The need to look inwards grew among the laity and since then they have added 2,000-3,000 indigenous priests from the Archdiocese of Owerri alone.

While working as a priest in Nigeria, Fr. Desmond opened 4 churches which are now parishes. He can count about twelve priests that used his example as their role model and has gotten sixteen

letters from candidates from his former parishes, now seminarians in Nigeria and elsewhere. He has also witnessed seven young ladies from his former parishes, profess their vows as nuns.



Fr. Desmond emphasized that vocations must start, with each priest, each parish and each family.

And the roles of parents are the key. If parents are OK with their children entering the military, why is it not OK for them to be fighting the war for souls in the service of the Lord?

"Is there anything else you believe is key to vocation formation?" I asked him after the meeting and he offered the following suggestions:

1. Vocations come when seminarians recruit friends. Priests are also good recruiters, and religious women too.
2. Catholic mothers need to be involved in the vocation drive. The CCW should be empowered to think about the future of the church.
3. Have more workshops for youth, organizing events between two to three parishes.
4. Charge each parish council to recruit one or two seminarians within two years.
5. Get more religious women involved in Catholic education and CCD classes in the parishes again.
6. Emphasize strong Bible Study across all age groups.
7. Show a little more respect to the ordained ministers.

Fr. Desmond's story was truly inspirational and the vocation success in Nigeria breathtaking. We would do well to heed some of his suggestions.

— Peter Paolucci



Serra Club Inducts Five New Members



At the November meeting, we inducted five new members into the Serra Club of Savannah. Alex Guira, Cathy Gilligan, Roxie Bryant, and Jim and Rita Wegmann (left to right above) committed their time, efforts and prayers for promotion of a better understanding and appreciation of the life and ministry of the ordained priest and religious, and thus the encouragement and preservation of vocations to Church ministry.

President Don Waters, asked them to be faithful in attending the Serra Club meetings and by the example of their own Catholic lives, to promote and deepen Christian justice and charity, and continually strive to fulfill their own Christian vocation to service.

He also asked them to commit to share the Serra community with others who likewise have much to give and gain from Catholic friendships made through membership in the Serra Club.

He concluded with a prayer, "Loving God, look with favor upon the Serrans assembled here today and especially our new members. Bless their important Ministry and help them grow in their faith and promote priestly and religious vocations. May many generous people, in their vocations, preach the Good News of Jesus and make His love visible in the lives of those whom they serve. We ask this through Christ our lord."

(AMEN!)

Byron and Marilyn Stephens and Sandy Humphrey assisted President Don by distributing membership certificates, Serra pins and badges to the new members.

We now have 34 members in the club, still short of our goal of 50. Everyone should try to bring a guest to a future meeting or event in order to encourage them to join Serra.

— Peter Paolucci

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President: Don Waters
VP Communications: Peter Paolucci
Newsletter Contact: Editor-Walt Kessel
(912) 354-9493
<waltkessel@comcast.net>