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Interview: Out of Africa

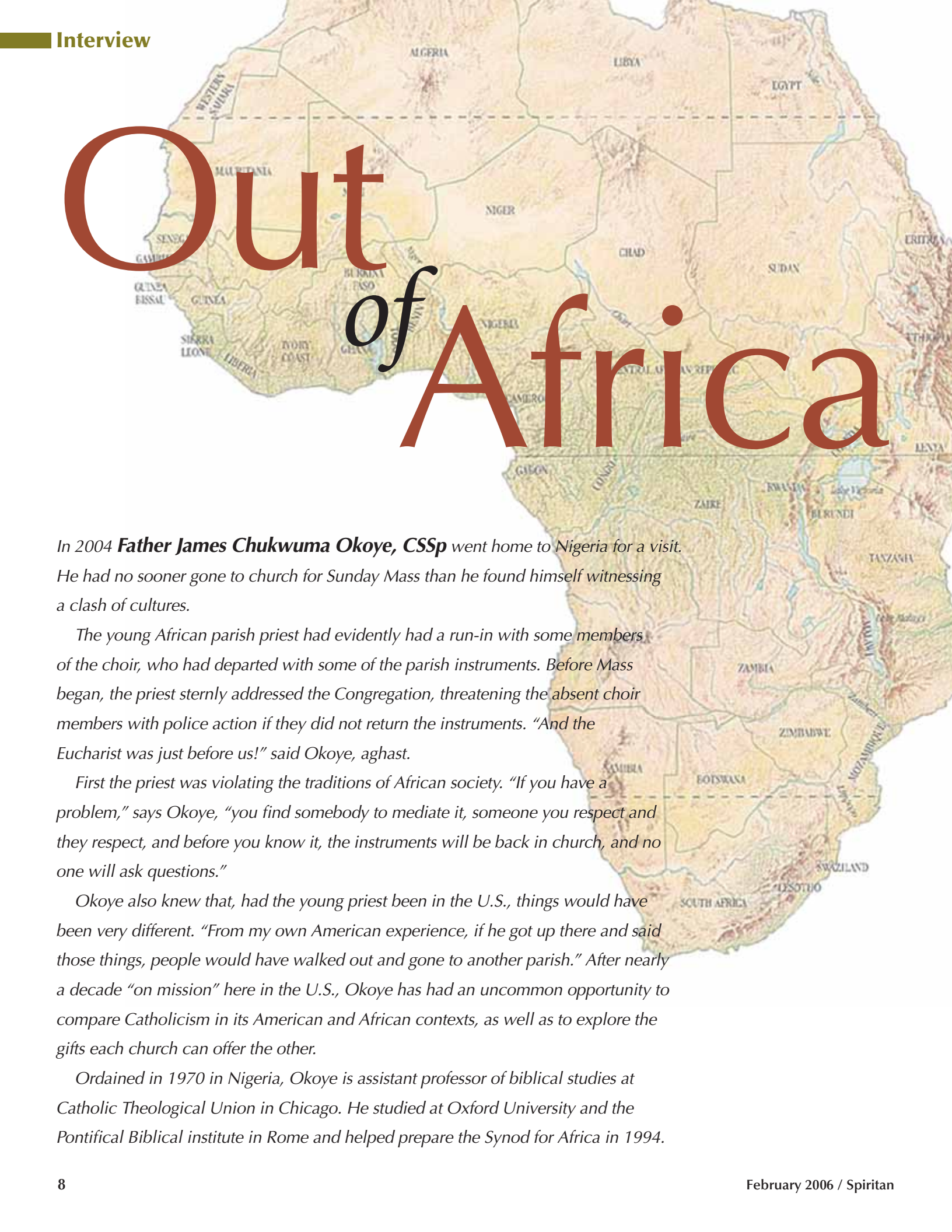
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Out of Africa

In 2004 **Father James Chukwuma Okoye, CSSp** went home to Nigeria for a visit. He had no sooner gone to church for Sunday Mass than he found himself witnessing a clash of cultures.

The young African parish priest had evidently had a run-in with some members of the choir, who had departed with some of the parish instruments. Before Mass began, the priest sternly addressed the Congregation, threatening the absent choir members with police action if they did not return the instruments. “And the Eucharist was just before us!” said Okoye, aghast.

First the priest was violating the traditions of African society. “If you have a problem,” says Okoye, “you find somebody to mediate it, someone you respect and they respect, and before you know it, the instruments will be back in church, and no one will ask questions.”

Okoye also knew that, had the young priest been in the U.S., things would have been very different. “From my own American experience, if he got up there and said those things, people would have walked out and gone to another parish.” After nearly a decade “on mission” here in the U.S., Okoye has had an uncommon opportunity to compare Catholicism in its American and African contexts, as well as to explore the gifts each church can offer the other.

Ordained in 1970 in Nigeria, Okoye is assistant professor of biblical studies at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. He studied at Oxford University and the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome and helped prepare the Synod for Africa in 1994.



We hear that the church is growing fast in Africa. What's behind that growth?

In parts of Africa it is not growing. But where it is, I think we have to consider the grace of God. Because God's grace is mediated through culture, many also think it is because traditional African religion is close to Catholicism. The traditional religion is sacramental, with sacred words, places and events.

The Catholicism that the missionaries introduced was so close to what the people already had that people are now rejecting some of the newer approaches as not being Catholic.

How is the faith acculturated in Africa?

Religion in the African context looks not just at the soul but also at the body and at society.

Any priest or pastoral worker must know that in Africa you are dealing with the whole human being, and the church and the sacraments must respond to the whole human being. There must be new thinking about the sacraments because they began as

divine transformation for the life cycles. Now they are somewhat removed from that cycle and have become only spiritual.

Does that mean sacraments should look different from place to place?

They already do. Even here in North America, if you go to Mass in a Mexican community, it is very different from the liturgy in a white suburban parish. They both use the same ritual, but one celebration lasts two hours and the other lasts 40 minutes. In the Mexican parish people greet others like family, and the children cry and play, and it's all part of the liturgy.

How would an African Mass differ from one in North America?

The Zaire rite, which was used at the African Synod in 1994 in St. Peter's in Rome, begins with a sacred dance in which everyone participates, moving this way and that way, very gently with their hands raised in prayer.

The dancers move up the aisle and behind the altar and stay there while the bishop or priest comes up and dances around the altar. After that, instead of kissing the altar, which is not an African ges-

ture, he would put his hands in a V-shape and prostrate himself before the altar.

This whole entrance rite takes about 30 minutes, but remember that Africans like expressing themselves in song, with their bodies, with their minds and hearts. The

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There is another, different dance to present the gifts. The person who carries up the gifts who is approved by and represents the community, is conscious of carrying the whole community with the bread and the wine, and that person will give it to the priest, saying "This is the offering of the community, and we are asking you to present it to God."



Is the Zaire rite common in Africa?

No, it was approved by Rome only for the dioceses of Zaire, though it is spreading beyond that country. Other rites were developed for Zambia, Cameroon, and Ashanti land in Ghana. Rome has been rather wary of these developments.

When I was assisting on the commission preparing the liturgy for the African Synod, the African bishops informed the master of ceremonies at St. Peter's what they wanted to do, but he said, "You cannot have drums and dancing at St. Peter's!" He told them to use a Latin musical setting because every African could sing in Latin, while the rest of the Mass would use the colonial languages of English, French and Portuguese.

Shortly after this the commission had lunch with Pope John Paul II, and the pope asked, "How is the commission going?" One of the members said, "Your Holiness, there's a minor issue," and proceeded to explain the divided opinions about showcasing something African in the liturgy. Before he even finished, the pope said, "The more African, the better." Well, that ended the whole discussion. It was fantastic. The cardinals were dancing in the Mass.

Why is there still fear over adapting the Mass more widely in Africa and the rest of the world?

The fear is that if you don't control people's expressions of faith, they might go overboard. Fortunately, however, inculturation is not imposed from on high. It begins from below, from the people's

appropriation of the faith. Perhaps inculturation is forcing us to actually see how the people are really living the faith.

Would Catholics in Africa see Jesus differently than North American Catholics?

North Americans tend to see Jesus as God so much that they tend to forget the human in him. Pastors in Africa have a duty to remind people about Jesus's humanity.

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The person who fills in for Jesus's humanity is Mary. When you have problems, you go to Mary, not Jesus. You go to Jesus to pray and to worship.

Africans see Jesus as a messenger from God, which corresponds to the expectation in our culture of receiving a message from above. It was easy for people to accept the missionaries as people bringing messages from God.

In many African American Churches you find images of Jesus as an African. Do you find those in Africa as well?

The scholars in Africa would like to have images of Christ and Mary as African, but many of the people would prefer the traditional European Jesus.

Why?

Because this has been the tradition. Personally I think we should have a black Christ, as we do in the chapel of the Spiritan seminary in Nigeria. We have the risen African Christ on one side and on the other a cross. Both are carved out of wood from the land. They're beautiful. While people's first impressions weren't positive, now they love it.

It's important that when something new is done, it is done well. Then it will catch on by the force of its beauty. Change in Africa is very delicate, very organic. You cannot just come in and make a change. It's not that Africans don't accept the idea of a black Christ, but they at first cling to what's been done before. Once they've seen the new approach is good, they accept it.

What issues are high on the North American agenda that don't figure in the African church?

Many issues in the North American church are not really issues in Africa. We do not have a crisis concerning abuse of minors by clergy, for example.

I say that with some reservation because I began my priestly life as a secretary to a bishop and have learned that things are not always as they appear. In 1970 and 1971 the bishops were asked to write to Pope Paul VI in support of the church's teaching against artificial birth control. Publicly



everyone in Africa was behind the pope, but when I talked to some educated men and women, I found out that for a few the public stance was not their personal one.

In Africa people will defer to what they consider is the norm, willingly or unwillingly. Norms have both moral and social value. When people do not agree with the norms of the community, they do not speak out, but follow the processes for effecting change in the community.

Is church authority exercised differently in Africa?

Authority is a stronger value in Africa not only in the church but in society, so the effect is doubled. In traditional African thinking authority is a symbol of the community and therefore represents the common good.

The traditional authority figure was supposed to defend the community even to death. That person was not autonomous; he or she was bound to counselors. When the counselors met, they would meet the whole day and have different points of view, but they didn't make a decision until they reached a consensus.

The authority figure is supposed to be able to say, "We have talked and now we must act. So hearing all of you, my sense is that this is what we would like to do." The authority figure will not say "I" but "we."

Why do people favor this approach?

Because in Africa when we quarrel, we remember that we will have to live together tomorrow. So we must not deal with con-

flicts in a way that prevents us from living together tomorrow.

Many North American parishes now have African clergy ministering to them. What challenges does this pose?

Because African culture and particularly clerical cultural is very different from that in the U.S., I think anyone interested in

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ministering here should study theology here and take the time to acculturate themselves, to "become American" in thought and feeling in a sense.

What are some issues on which an African seminarian would need special attention?

He would need help on relating to women in an egalitarian manner in a parish setting and on working as part of a team. In Africa the priest hands down sacraments and decrees. Obviously that's not the case here.

The other thing is that the community should be prepared to receive the priest as well, and this may mean a significant change of attitudes.

What would a parish receive from an African priest?

Mission is based on an exchange of gifts. I think you could ask what each side can bring to the other.

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Most of all, an African priest can further the connections between the U.S. and African churches. An African priest could lead parishioners to an awareness of the effect of first-world policies on Africa, policies of the International Monetary Fund, for example.

What gifts might an African priest find among us?

He might learn that, although North America tends toward individualism, the good thing is that faith here is very personal. In Africa some people are simply carried along by the community, and they can't really articulate their own faith. An African priest might also appreciate the superb management and wide lay participation in the church. ■

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