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Roman Catholicism in Africa: Western Africa

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Roman Catholicism in Africa: Western Africa. The history of Roman Catholicism in Western Africa began along the Atlantic coast in the context of disruptive colonial incursions (18th and 19th c.). (Earlier missionaries, Portuguese Capuchins* [15th c.], did not have a lasting impact.) Modern Roman Catholicism gradually evolved from the missions to Western Africa pioneered by Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny, under the leadership of Anne-Marie Javouhey (1779–1851); the Congregation of the Holy Ghost, under the inspiration of François Libermann (1802–52); and the Society of African Missions, founded by Melchior de Marion Brèsillac (1813–58). Since then the number of Roman Catholics has steadily grown (in 2000, c36 million out of 269 million West Africans).

The colonial* legacy endures in the linguistic divide between two regional umbrella bodies: the Association of Episcopal Conferences of Anglophone West Africa and the Episcopal Conferences of French-Speaking West Africa. Phenomenal growth continues in the recruitment of ministers, with some seminaries training more than 500 seminarians (e.g. in Nigeria). Since the late 20th c., indigenous bishops, priests, and nuns have assumed leadership of the Church. As elsewhere in Africa, Catholic religious* orders operate hospitals, schools, and social centers. The increasingly public profile of Catholicism in Western Africa can be attributed to the active roles played by prominent Church leaders in the political sphere.

Two key issues have shaped the character of Roman Catholicism in Western Africa: the challenge of Islam* and the struggle to adapt and integrate indigenous religious traditions. The tense relation with Islam often results in violent confrontations, especially where Muslims constitute the majority, as in Senegal*, Nigeria*, and Burkina* Faso. On the contrary,

the encounter with African* Religion has generated various forms of inculturated* theology and worship in countries like Ghana* and Nigeria. This positive view departs from erstwhile attempts to suppress the beliefs and practices of indigenous religions.

Indicators of a vibrant Roman Catholicism in Western Africa include the recent beatification* of the Nigerian Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi (1903–64) and the development of an active missionary vocation. Many of its priests and nuns serve in churches in the Western Hemisphere. A pivotal example is the Missionary Society of St. Paul founded in 1977 by the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria for the sole purpose of sending priests on mission to other parts of Africa as well as to the First World and elsewhere, which is a confirmation of the maturity of Roman Catholicism in Western Africa.

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