



Special Report

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THEME: “Consecrated Women in Africa Creating Global Impact Through Sustainable Development”

Monasteries Matter: Unveiling the Strength and Silent Struggles of Africa’s

Contemplative Sisters

Behind the serene walls of Africa’s monasteries lies a world of prayer, labor, and unwavering faith but also one of quiet struggle. Sr. Agatha Mwalachi, and Dr. Jacob Jeketule, in their joint presentation titled “*Needs of Monasteries in Sub-Saharan Africa*,” peeled back the veil on the hidden challenges confronting contemplative nuns, offering a rare and compassionate look into the heart of cloistered life on the continent.

Their study, which surveyed 66 monasteries — 40 of them under the Conference of the Contemplative Communities of Kenya (CCCK) revealed a sobering truth: while monasteries are spiritual powerhouses sustaining the Church through constant prayer, they are simultaneously burdened by material and structural inadequacies that threaten their sustainability and dignity.

Monasteries, they reminded participants, have long stood as sacred spaces of contemplation, prayer, and witness. In Africa, the earliest Catholic monasteries date back to the late 1800s, when German monks founded the first houses in Tanzania. After Pope Pius XII’s *Fidei Donum* call in 1957, new monasteries began to bloom across the continent, embodying a unique blend of African spirituality and Catholic tradition.

“Monasteries are the hidden lungs of the Church,” said Sr. Agatha. “They breathe life into the world through unceasing prayer, even when the world forgets them.”

Yet, that very hiddenness — the silence that defines their vocation has become a double-edged sword. While the Church celebrates their spiritual value, few are aware of their growing material struggles.

The study found that nearly 43% of monastic spaces remain unoccupied. Declining vocations, changing social dynamics, and limited visibility of contemplative life have left many monasteries operating below capacity.

Most of the nuns currently serving are between the ages of 26–35 or 46–55 a sign of both youthful vitality and aging leadership. Many have already taken solemn vows, dedicating their entire lives to prayer and service. But the future remains uncertain unless new vocations are inspired and supported.

If monasteries are symbols of stability, their physical conditions tell a different story. Aging infrastructure, incomplete buildings, and leaking roofs are common. In some communities, guest houses and chapels remain half-built due to lack of funds.

Beyond buildings, the sisters struggle with outdated equipment for making hosts, candles, and crafts the very products that sustain their daily needs. Without modern machinery, production is slow, costly, and often unreliable. Rising electricity prices and farming costs further strain already fragile budgets.

“The beauty of prayer is not meant to coexist with broken walls,” Dr. Jeketule noted. “When a roof leaks, or power is too expensive to run a water pump, it’s not just an economic problem it’s a disruption to the rhythm of prayer.”

Another distressing finding was the lack of medical insurance for many sisters. Illnesses and emergencies often mean relying on goodwill or delaying treatment. For communities devoted to prayer and service, this lack of basic health protection is a heavy burden.

Security is another concern. Some monasteries have incomplete or collapsing perimeter walls, leaving them vulnerable to intrusion. And as their members age, most monasteries lack facilities for the elderly or disabled, no ramps, handrails, or accessible washrooms. Such physical neglect starkly contrasts with the dignity of the vocation lived within these walls.

Although many monasteries produce high-quality religious goods; hosts, candles, soaps, or crafts, their market reach remains limited. Without coordinated marketing or online presence, most rely on local parish networks and occasional visitors.

The researchers noted that simple changes could make a major difference: shared marketing strategies, bulk

purchasing of materials, and digital promotion could dramatically increase visibility and sales, sustaining monastic communities for generations to come.

Formation remains the heartbeat of monastic life — but it comes at a cost. Training new sisters requires funds for travel, educational materials, and qualified facilitators. With rising expenses and declining income, formation programs are increasingly difficult to sustain.

Libraries, too, are often under-resourced, with outdated texts and few learning materials. Access to online theological resources is limited by poor internet connectivity and high data costs.

In the face of these realities, the study calls for hybrid formation models, sharing resources among monasteries and integrating online tools to cut costs while maintaining academic and spiritual depth.

Key Insights: When Silence Speaks

The findings carry a clear message: monastic communities, though contemplative and hidden, are indispensable pillars of the Church’s spiritual and moral life. Their prayer sustains missions, their witness inspires faith, and their simplicity reminds the world of God’s presence in quietness.

But as Sr. Agatha emphasized, “Silence should not mean invisibility. The Church must see us — not to disturb our quiet, but to support our life.”

Pathways to Renewal

The study proposes practical, actionable solutions:

- **Adopt renewable energy** through solar or biogas to reduce electricity costs.
- **Establish affordable health insurance** programs tailored for religious communities.
- **Modernize production tools** for candles, hosts, and crafts to increase income.
- **Coordinate marketing** among monasteries to expand reach and avoid duplication.
- **Upgrade infrastructure**, ensuring accessibility for elderly and disabled sisters.
- **Promote awareness** about the value of contemplative life in the modern Church.
- **Pool resources for formation**, including shared training and digital education tools.

These recommendations, though simple, could significantly improve quality of life and sustainability for contemplative communities across Africa.

A Call to Remember the Hidden Warriors

At the conclusion of their presentation, Sr. Agatha and Dr. Jeketule noted that behind the walls of silence are women who pray the world forward. They intercede for peace, guide the Church invisibly, and hold the rhythm of grace that keeps faith alive in countless hearts.

Yet their silence must not lead to neglect. The study calls on Church leaders, benefactors, and lay faithful alike to see monasteries not as relics of the past but as living sanctuaries of faith, discipline, and divine love that need our solidarity and support.

“Monasteries matter,” Sr. Agatha concluded. “They may be hidden, but they are the heartbeat of the Church. When they are strong, the whole Church breathes better.”