

FATHER ALIMSINYA ATUIRE

A YOUNG AFRICAN PRIEST REFLECTS ON HIS LIFE AND WORK

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

Father **Caesar Alimsinya Atuire**, 40, is arguably one of the most influential young priests in Rome today. Since May, he has been the new head of the Vatican's pilgrimage business, the *Opera Romana Pellegrinaggio* (the Roman Pilgrimage Works, or ORP). In this post, he has scores of employees and administers a small fleet of jet aircraft which transport hundreds of thousands of pilgrims every year to Lourdes, Fatima, the Holy Land, and beyond.

Because of the importance of this agency, this priest, born in Ghana in 1967, is arguably one of the most interesting young African priests in the world.

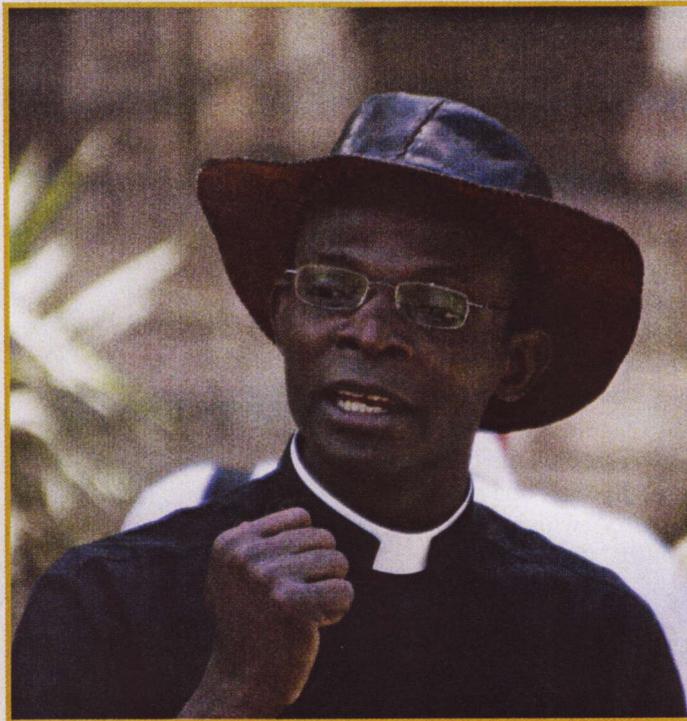
As a youth, Atuire traveled from Ghana to England, eventually entering the Imperial College of the University of London to study civil engineering. While there, his interest in philosophy and theology deepened, and he decided to come to Rome. In 1994, he graduated from Rome's Gregorian University with a degree in philosophy. He was ordained in 1997, and two years later he earned a degree in dogmatic theology from the *Regina Apostolorum* University. He earned his doctorate in 2004, defending a thesis in philosophy entitled: "Leaping the Bounds of the Elysian Fields: An Anthropological Enquiry Concerning Suicide."

He was founder of the publishing house *Logos Press* and of the magazine *Sacerdos*, and he is a prolific author of scholarly articles. At present, he is working on a book about Pontius Pilate.

He met with **Lucy Gordan** in his office at ORP's headquarters on Via della Pigna 3 near the Pantheon.

Father Atuire, perhaps we could begin with your childhood and vocation...

FATHER CAESAR ALIMSINYA ATUIRE: Both my parents were converted to the Catholic faith when I was about two or three years old. I was baptized on the same day as my older brother, who lives in Denver now, when I was five years old. As a teenager, I went to school in England. During my last year of studying civil engineering, I met a Jesuit priest who became



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—FATHER ATUIRE

extremely influential in my life.

It had always been my intention to return to Ghana to help my people, but through getting to know Father Hugh Thwaites, a very holy man, who is quite well-known in conservative, traditional circles because he supports returning to the Latin Mass, over time I matured the idea of doing something more worthwhile for my people than building bridges or dams.

Father Hugh encouraged me to join the Legionaries of Christ in Dublin, and I did so.

Then, five years ago, I left the Order, and am now a diocesan priest in the diocese of Rome. That's more or less my story in a nutshell.

Were there priests in your family before you?

ATUIRE: No, never, not before me and not now, although my family was very active in all our parish events. As a child, I was very close to the White Father missionaries.

When you were a child, most of the priests in Africa were Europeans. Am I right that this situation is no longer true?

ATUIRE: Yes, of course, they were European missionaries, but, for example, now our parish priest is from Ghana.

In the developed world — Europe and the United States, as well as in South America — there is a serious shortage of priests and dwindling vocations. What's the situation in Ghana, in Africa?

ATUIRE: Yes, there's a shortage of priests everywhere. The distribution of priests worldwide is a fascinating topic. Europe still has the highest concentration of priests; yet in Africa, and particularly in Ghana, our seminaries are full, but the rate of growth of new believers in

the Catholic Church is much, much faster even than the rate of growth of priestly vocations, though there are many more requests to enter seminaries than places. So we desperately need to build new seminaries.

In 2002, you founded the *Amicus Association*, a non-governmental, apolitical, non-affiliated organization that helps the citizens of developing countries to help themselves. Can

you tell me briefly about this work?

ATUIRE: At the moment, we operate only in Ghana. There, for example, our "Baobab Project" rotates around the philosophy of the Baobab tree.

In Africa, the Baobab tree represents something that is durable, a form of life which withstands natural disasters. It offers shade, food, and medicines. It's called "the tree of life." My feeling reflects this Chinese proverb: "If you are planning for a year, you grow rice. If you are planning for ten years, you grow trees. If you are planning for a hundred years or more, you grow human beings."

As far as I'm concerned, the key to development in the poorer countries of the world is investing in the people who live there. Our Baobab Academy in Accra offers young people from troubled backgrounds training in a trade. Then we give them micro-credits so they can start small businesses. It works very well.

We also have a small outdoor clinic in Biriwa near Cape Coast in the center of Ghana that cares for about 10,000 people per year. We do outreach to villages to teach school children hygiene and their mothers hygiene, pre-natal and child care. In a nutshell, we advocate preventive medicine so as to avoid hospitalization. Hopefully, in two years, by the grace of God, we should open a University Center to train nurses, engineers, and administrators.

In West Africa, differently from Central and Southern Africa, the main killer is malaria, not AIDS. Sometimes I get annoyed when people talk so much about AIDS, because there are so many other killers that would be so inexpensive to wipe out. For example, it costs only 40 cents to cure malaria. To allow someone to die from malaria, just for 40 cents, is inexcusable. So much money is being poured into so many superfluous things, even medicines...

In 1992 you founded Logos Press, headquartered in Bellingham, Washington, USA. It's grown from a couple of programmers in a basement into one of the largest developers of Bible software in the world and a global leader in multilingual electronic publishing. What's your role at Logos now? And what languages do you speak?

ATUIRE: Since I left the Legionaries of Christ in 2002, I have not collaborated with Logos Press.

Regarding languages: I speak Bulsa, the local language of my tribe, as well as Hausa and Twi, other languages spoken in Ghana, English of course, French, Spanish, some Portuguese, and because of my theological studies, Latin and Ancient Greek.

Growing up in Ghana meant that I spoke four languages from toddlerhood. In theory, Bulsa would be my mother tongue. In school we spoke English. Most of the people around me spoke either Hausa or Twi, so in Ghana most everyone grows up speaking at least two or three languages.

I was born with a natural flair for languages. That ability

Opposite, Father Caesar Atuire. Below, a candlelight procession at the shrine of Lourdes, in France. Next page, Fatima, in Portugal



become a priest?

ATUIRE: My mother sent me a cassette which I still have. The tape says: "When you were born we tried to give you the best we could in everything, but now God is giving you something we never could have given to you. So go ahead."

In 2004 you wrote your doctoral dissertation on suicide. Isn't that a taboo subject for the Church? How did you get permission?

ATUIRE: I was getting my Ph.D. in moral philosophy and not theology, so I wasn't dealing directly with the doctrines regarding suicide, which gave me greater freedom.

I was drawn to the topic of suicide for three reasons. One: only human beings commit suicide; no other animal on earth does. Two: people who commit suicide actually love life. They love life so much that they are disgruntled by their daily lifestyle. They don't hate life; they hate the way they are living. Three: today people talk about legalizing euthanasia. One of the aspects of my thesis was to examine throughout the history of humanity, in all the civilizations up until our times, how the different cultures and civilizations dealt with euthanasia. A society cannot allow people to kill themselves because the goal of all societies has been and still is to protect and promote life. To say that we can actually pass laws that deny that goal is incoherent.

I wrote in my thesis: "For those with no experience of it, mental illness can be frightening and frustrating; why can't a depressed person just 'snap out of it'? The despair of many who eventually take their lives can be compared to the oppressiveness of being trapped in a tunnel... In order for a sin to be mortal, not only must a serious matter be involved, but full knowledge and deliberate consent must be present — conditions that are typically absent in those who are mentally ill... Faith provides a framework to keep them together. Without it, emotional stamina can be compromised."

You are saying that religious faith is a deterrent to suicide?

ATUIRE: Yes.

You also founded *Sacerdos*, the magazine about the ongoing formation of Catholic priests sponsored by the Legionaries of Christ and the *Regnum Christi* Movement. Why did you join the Legionaries and not another order?

ATUIRE: As I've already said, my mentor, my spiritual director, the English Jesuit Hugh Thwaites, suggested it. He said that I would receive the same excellent education and solid intellectual formation, self-discipline and dedication, as the Jesuits provided to him, but in a more vibrant environment with younger colleagues.

Besides deep faith, what do you think are the essential characteristics at the start of a vocation so that it lasts?

ATUIRE: Level-headedness, not only a deep faith, but a sim-

ple one. Not to be out on a crusade, but to realize that God is calling you and that you are putting your life at God's disposal to do with it whatever He wants. The famous: "Thy will be done" with my life. Mary's *Magnificat*. The handmaiden of the Lord. That's the spirit that one has to bring to a vocation.

But I also strongly believe that all the gifts we receive in life, especially gifts that are of a spiritual nature, have to be nurtured. We have to nurture our faith and our faithfulness to our priestly vocation every day. A good priest must be free. I tell myself every day and I tell other priests too that I don't want to be a prisoner of a decision I took in the past. So every day I need to want to be a priest and renew my vocation. I'm not a priest today simply because one day in the past I stood before an altar and said "yes." I want to be free to say "yes" every day, but, that means I have to re-examine regularly the motivations of my choice. This self-questioning is what keeps my priesthood alive, young, and fresh.

What else is essential to the maintenance of your faith and vocation?

ATUIRE: Contact with people.

Besides prayer, retreats and pilgrimages, what are your suggestions for ongoing formation?

ATUIRE: Prayer in itself is not a magic key. It's how you pray.

Ongoing formation means developing a personal relationship with God and with Christ Our Lord. The deeper the relationship, the more it becomes the foundation of your life.

Personally, the circumstances of my life have changed so often in these 10 years since I've become a priest and are continuing to change, that my one constant effort is to keep alive and growing my relationship with Christ. That is what sustains my vocation.

How did you become the CEO of *Opera Romana Pellegrinaggio*, which organizes Christian pilgrimages all over the world?

ATUIRE: I was managing director from 2004 until May 2007, when I was named CEO. As managing director I was responsible for the daily internal administration of ORP; as CEO I oversee everything including planning new programs and worldwide promotion.

Before that, from 2002 to 2004, I was ORP's *assistente spirituale* or chaplain; I accompanied pilgrims on their trips and I worked here in Rome in our *centro pastorale*. My duties here were to act as chaplain for ORP's employees and to prepare the priests who act as chaperones for our pilgrimages both spiritually and touristically.

What exactly is ORP?

ATUIRE: The Vatican's travel agency. (*laughs*) No, seriously it's the Vatican's institution to evangelize through pastoral tourism and the ministry of pilgrimage.

At the end of August, we signed a five-year agreement with Mistral Air, a small airline owned by the privatized Italian Post Office and ORP, for flights to major Christian pilgrimage sites, leaving from Rome and six other Italian airports. Some will be one-day pilgrimages. Our first flight was from Rome to Lourdes. We have planned another 30 such flights until the end of

the year to Fatima, Santiago de Campostela, Czestochowa, Alexandria, Mount Sinai, and the Holy Land. For now we have three Boeing 737s, each with a capacity for 148 passengers, but we aim to serve 150,000 passengers a year. For more information about our programs, click on www.orpnet.org.

Would it be fair to say that, after setting up ongoing formation for the clergy, you moved to perhaps the even greater challenge of instilling religious inspiration and maintaining faith for the general public?

ATUIRE: Yes. And what's more, here at ORP we have a very interesting setup. Our pilgrims come from all over the world and from every rank of society and are of all ages. The last time I went to Lourdes, there was a pilgrim who was a small baby and another who was nearly 100 years old. Our participants

range from government ministers to pensioners who can hardly make ends meet.

How many pilgrims travelled with ORP since you became managing director in 2004? Do you know offhand their numbers for 2005 and 2006?

ATUIRE: Yes, around 250,000 in 2005; 300,000 or so in 2006; and we are estimating more than 400,000 for 2007.

Every year you've added new itineraries. For 2008?

ATUIRE: They have not yet been finalized.

Monsignor Andreatta appears on ORP's website and in its catalog, and you don't. What is the difference in your roles at ORP?

ATUIRE: Monsignor Andreatta is our vice-president. He is basically the substitute for the president who is Cardinal Camillo Ruini, who, of course, is a very busy man. So whenever His Eminence cannot be present, Monsignor Andreatta takes his place. Monsignor Andreatta is an external patron of ORP; let's put it that way.

You have accompanied pilgrims several times this past summer to the Holy Land. What other of ORP's trips have you accompanied?

ATUIRE: This year I've been to Lourdes and to Egypt several times, to the Red Sea, to St. Catherine's Monastery and other monasteries in the Sinai.

I also traveled to monasteries in Northern Egypt where monasticism started and to the desert of Southern Israel to investigate adding these pilgrimages in 2008.

Some of ORP's itineraries seem strictly spiritual; others seem rather secular, like the wellness and seaside holidays. Is there a strategy there?

ATUIRE: There isn't exactly a strategy as such, but there's a line of thought. Dostoevsky said: "Beauty will save the world." Through the contemplation of artistic monuments and natural beauty, one can help people to rediscover their spiritual and transcendental dimension.

So because of that, sometimes we have proposals and some itineraries that have more of an artistic and cultural dimension, but their content is one that allows people to find God.

That's our whole approach. Even in our less "cultural" itineraries, we usually include a visit to a shrine or some important religious monument.



I see from the catalog that you offer only one pilgrimage to Africa. Why Namibia and not Ghana?

ATUIRE: We have lots of pilgrims going to Africa and not just Namibia. You should know that 40% of our work is off-catalog. For example, we organize groups who work alongside missionaries in Kenya and Tanzania. There are groups who want me to take them to Ghana, but I don't have the time right now. However, as soon as I find the time, I'll be accompanying pilgrims to Ghana.

In addition to all your speaking engagements and travels, you're also working on several books...

ATUIRE: I'm working on a book about Pontius Pilate. His role is very difficult to interpret. His figure invites us to a deeper reflection. He made too many compromises. He could have been faithful to his conscience and not crucified Jesus. However, that opens up a Pandora's box. The fatalists or those who believe in predestination will ask: "If he hadn't crucified Jesus, would we have been saved?" The fact that he actually condemned Jesus to an unjust death and that we were saved through this unjust death does not justify the fact that he acted unjustly.

I was attracted to Pontius Pilate because he has always been a very controversial figure. The Ethiopian Church, for example, has canonized him; he is a saint because there is a legend that he converted to Christianity with his wife Claudia Procula, who had actually sent him a message not to condemn Jesus, to have nothing to do with his death.

As governor or prefect of Judea, Pontius Pilate was actually based in Caesarea Maritima, but he traveled frequently throughout the province, especially to Jerusalem during Passover to maintain order because there were always protests by the Jews during Passover. Pontius Pilate was willing to sacrifice anything in order to maintain law and order, and he sacrificed Jesus.

Something similar can happen to any of us. Sometimes we set ourselves certain goals and, in order to maintain those goals, we can become very cruel and unjust.

What aren't we willing to sacrifice to achieve our goals? How many people do we want to leave dead along the way in order to achieve our goals?

What other figures of the Bible intrigue you?

ATUIRE: Abraham, because of his serious doubts about his faith; Moses, because of his violence and his arrogance; King David, because he was a lady's man; St. Peter, because he was a fatuous conceited fool; and St. Paul, the intellectual snob. I gave a series of talks on these subjects.

What Biblical figure would you like to talk to over dinner?

ATUIRE: St. Paul. His journey, the tests of his faith, were more arduous. He had to go through several levels of conversion.

If you want to see Paul's real conversion, read his letter to the Philippians, Chapter 3, where he lists all the important social and professional positions he held until then, his c.v., and says they were "excrement" compared with the opportunity to get to know Jesus Christ. That's a deeper conversion.

You are only 40. Do you think that during your lifetime a non-European will be elected Pope? An African?

ATUIRE: I don't rule out the possibility of an African Pope. Not immediately, but in the future.

In any case, he would not be the first, because several early Popes were African. ●

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