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Pope Francis celebrates a canonization Mass in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican in May 2022. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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June 19, 2025

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Across Africa, many Catholic faithful have long yearned for the Catholic Church to fully recognize the spiritual heroes who've shaped their communities — people like Kenya's Blessed Irene Stefani and South Africa's Blessed Benedict Daswa. Their beatifications were moments of deep pride and hope, yet the journey to sainthood has since moved slowly.

Now, with the election of Pope Leo XIV, many African Catholics might see a renewed opportunity. Could this be the turning point?

For decades, African Catholics have felt their saints have been sidelined. The continent is home to some of the fastest-growing Catholic populations, yet very few modern Africans have been declared saints. Most of the African saints widely known today lived centuries ago, such as St. Augustine of Hippo, while Europe has seen many canonizations in just the past few decades. The longing for recognition remains alive and deeply personal.

As a result, a growing number of people have consistently advocated for the recognition of African saints, emphasizing the importance of local figures who resonate with the African faithful.

In Nigeria, this feeling is especially strong. As one commentary in *The Postcard* recently [highlighted](#), many Nigerian Catholics are asking why, despite the country's vibrant Catholic life, it has yet to see the canonization of one of its own.

"The way many Africans relate with their roots, they cannot relate in the same way with Christianity, Catholicism in particular with its huge list of European saints and foreign cultures," the article notes. "The least that could be done, alongside other inculturation efforts in the Church, is to recognize the martyrdom and heroic virtues of African saints."

The issue isn't a matter of holiness since African candidates have shown extraordinary faith. But compared to Europe, where many sainthood causes benefit from institutional support, funding and access to the Vatican, Africa faces unique challenges. Canonization is a complex and costly process. It requires documentation, verification of miracles and years of advocacy. Local dioceses may lack the resources to keep these causes moving forward. In the end, many African Catholics feel like their voices and stories have been left on the margins of a church they have helped to grow globally.

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That's why Leo's arrival brings renewed hope. Before ascending to the papacy, the pope had spent years serving as a missionary and later as a bishop in Peru. His ministry was shaped by walking with marginalized communities and uplifting local cultures in the Global South. This background gave him a deep sensitivity to the spiritual richness outside the traditional centers of power in the church. For African Catholics, his lived experience should offer something more than sympathy — it promises solidarity.

This pope's understanding of the faith expressed in different cultural contexts, and his closeness to communities often overlooked by the institutional Church, make him a uniquely positioned leader. There are good reasons to believe he could finally give stalled African sainthood causes the attention they deserve.

Take Blessed Irene Stefani, lovingly called "Nyaatha" (or "mother of mercy") by Kenya's Kikuyu people. An Italian missionary, Stefani arrived in Kenya in the early 20th century and quickly became known for her deep compassion and tireless service, especially during World War I. She cared for the sick, the wounded and poor in the Nyeri region, eventually giving her life in the process. She was beatified in 2015 during a large and emotional ceremony in Nyeri. Since then, however, her canonization process has largely stalled.

Then there is Blessed Benedict Daswa, a South African teacher and father who refused to take part in traditional rituals he believed clashed with his Christian faith. In 1990, he was killed for his beliefs. Daswa's martyrdom and the courage of his convictions resonated across the continent, especially for Christians facing similar cultural and spiritual conflicts. He was beatified in 2015, yet his canonization remains pending.

But the push for sainthood is about more than individual legacies. It's about belonging. African Catholics want to see themselves reflected in the universal story of the church. They want saints who walked where they walk, spoke their languages and lived their struggles. Saints who show that holiness doesn't only come from the cathedrals of Europe, but also from African classrooms, clinics, villages and homes.

That recognition, for many African Catholics, would affirm their deep connection to the faith and their rightful place in its future.

Leo's roots in the Global South and his pastoral heart offer a unique chance to shift the church's gaze toward Africa, not out of charity, but out of justice and truth. As Africa continues to shape the global church with its faith and vocations, it is only fitting that its saints be lifted for the world to see. This could be the moment.

With Leo at the helm, the dreams of many African Catholics may finally find a champion.