“Our mother, Kenya, we love you so much; we need you again,” sing the students at St. Joseph Freinademetz Primary School in Ruai, outside of Nairobi, the capital of Kenya.

In early 2008 Kenya abandoned her children. When violence broke out following the contested December 27, 2007 election, about 1,150 people were killed and 300,000 displaced. For three months students weren’t in school. Homes, farms, and businesses were burned to the ground, and the economy ground to a halt.

Young people set up road barricades around the country, demanding tolls from passersby and attacking people of the wrong tribe. In the Diocese of Kitale, three altar boys wouldn’t let their own parish priest through one barricade.

“All of them were Christian of some sort, but it didn’t prevent them from killing one another,” Bishop Maurice Crowley of Kitale says of the perpetrators of violence in Kenya, which is about 33 percent Catholic and 75 percent Christian. “The blood of tribalism runs thicker than the water of Baptism.”

The Catholic Church is growing faster in Africa than anywhere else in the world. From 1900 to 2000, the church grew from 1.9 million to 139 million Catholics in sub-Saharan Africa, according to National Catholic Reporter’s Vatican correspondent John Allen, who has dubbed 2009 “the year of Africa.”
Clockwise from top left: Two children in a refugee camp in Kitale; a class at Brother Beausang Educational Centre in Embulbul; Nkaimurunya preschool children perform a song about loving each other; a feeding program provides morning meals of porridge to Maasai preschool children.
Still, across the continent the church has found itself enmeshed in ethnic and political violence, whether aiding victims in Congo and Darfur or turning a blind eye to the Rwandan genocide. The situation in Kenya didn’t disintegrate into full civil war or genocide, a miracle Crowley attributes to “the intervention of God.”

The international community helped resolve the political conflict, but the intervention of God’s people in Kenya, who work to combat tribalism and reduce poverty, certainly brings hope to this young country. Today children are back at school, singing of peace and patriotism.

Just 45 years old, Kenya is still building its democracy. Likewise, through the past year’s turmoil in Kenya, the global church is learning how to best support people in the developing world, where two-thirds of the world’s Catholics now reside.

The more things change
To American observers the last Kenyan election might look familiar at first: increased interest in national politics; a wave of new, young voters; and a candidate campaigning on change. The main challenger, Raila Odinga, played up his connection to then-U.S. presidential candidate Barack Obama, whose father was part of the same tribe as Odinga, the Luo. The American and Kenyan elections, however, differed markedly.

President Mwai Kibaki and Odinga were allies, leading a coalition of opposition parties, until Kibaki was elected president in 2002. When Kibaki was declared the winner in 2007 by a small margin, Odinga called the election rigged, and violent clashes broke out around the country. Pressure from the international community led to a power-sharing agreement, with Odinga becoming the prime minister.

Noting fraud from both parties and “general incompetence” by election officials, the Kreigler Report, the official investigation of the election, found that its conduct “was so materially defective that it is impossible...to establish true or reliable results.”

The Waki Report, commissioned to investigate the post-election clashes, says business leaders and politicians encouraged violence. “These were systemic attacks on Kenyans based on their ethnicity and their political leanings,” it reads, countering the belief that the protests were spontaneous.

Kenyans believe their tribe’s candidate must win the presidency for them to access resources, the Waki Report says. Kibaki’s tribe, the Kikuyu, is the largest and seen as the most politically and economically powerful tribe, generating resentment among the country’s other 41 ethnic groups.

“I have witnessed clashes since 1992,” Bishop Crowley says, referring to the year of Kenya’s first multi-party elections. “Generally they’re tribal conflicts; generally they’re all due to politics; generally they’re all due to land.”

Barack Obama’s election on November 4 prompted a national holiday in Kenya. Meanwhile, some Kenyans compare their own election to Hurricane Katrina—a great shame.

Just as Katrina revealed the need to address poverty in the United States, Kenya’s post-election violence revealed the need for the nation to address political corruption and development. Those who support the recommendations of the Kreigler and Waki reports, including the Catholic bishops of Kenya, warn that the international community must hold the Kenyan government accountable.
Faith in each other

“Unity is stronger than hatred,” reads a poem written by the teachers at St. Joseph Freinademetz Primary School and performed by their students. When the teachers came back to work, however, school leaders had to convene a meeting to dissolve tension and reestablish trust.

Such meetings were necessary all around the country. “A lot of the staffs are mixed ethnically, and there was a lot of anger, suspicion, retreating, withdrawal,” says Michael Moloney of the Embulbul Education and Counseling Center, part of Mary Mother of God Parish outside Nairobi. The center has helped community leaders and ordinary people recover from the clashes.

Bishop Crowley was proactive with his own staff. Before the clashes even started, he told them, “The first tribalistic sentiment, you’re fired.”

While the government should carry out justice and compensate victims, the church is concerned with “neighborliness,” says Leonard Barasa, justice and peace coordinator for the Diocese of Kitale. “We can try to bring the two communities together and tell them, ‘You are still brothers and sisters. You can still live together. You have lived together for quite some time.’”

Reconciliation is just starting. The national church has declared justice, reconciliation, and peace to be the themes of Lent 2009. In a parish outside Kitale, a group that burned down houses during the clashes has donated supplies so that the church can rebuild homes.

The violence, however, has made church leaders question their past efforts. “Until the crisis, we thought everything was well,” says Father Fabian Hevi, S.M.A., pastor at Mary Mother of God Parish in Embulbul. “Then I asked myself, ‘What was the work of the evangelizers and missionaries? Was this work properly done?’ We should really re-evangelize.”

Hevi’s 10-year-old church has had 1,000 Baptisms in its short history, but he says it’s not enough to baptize people. Their faith must grow deeper.

“I [say] it Sunday after Sunday, love God and love your neighbor,” Crowley says. Church leaders agree that the work of deepening the Catholic faith lies in the hands of school teachers, lay catechists, and small Christian communities—spiritual and social groups of families that Crowley calls “the lifeblood of the church.”

Kiliani Makura feeds children through a Medical Missionaries of Mary AIDS program in Kibera, one of the world’s largest slums, located in Nairobi. Makura lost his bowls and utensils to looting during the clashes.

As a lay catechist he also teaches children about faith and forgiveness. Following the clashes, Makura talked about the commandment to love God and your neighbor. It was easy, he says, to convince them to play with children of other tribes again.

Terry Kagucia, a lay counselor in Embulbul, says more counseling is needed, especially for the youth. She recalls one 17-year-old student who went from wanting to be a pilot to wanting to be a soldier after witnessing fighting. “When I become an army officer, I can have a gun, control an army or something, protect my people,” he told Kagucia.

Counseling helped this student regain a positive view of the future. “But how many more have not gone through counseling and are still harboring their anger?” Kagucia says. “We have a lot of work ahead of us.”

Poverty and politics

Kibera has divided itself in the past year, says Sister Florence Njoku, M.M.M. Whereas tribes once mixed in the tiny alleyways, there are now distinct Luo and Kikuyu sections. Each tribe, though, lives in the same poverty.

Inequality exists within the tribes, but Barasa says the elite of all tribes play the poor off each other. “Here in Kenya tribalism has been taken advantage of by politicians,” he explains. “They talk about tribalism so they can ascend to power.”

The Waki Report blames the politicians rather than the poor for the post-election violence. Poverty leads to “feelings of resentment and powerlessness, sentiments that can and have been mobilized violently,” it reads.

In a country with an inadequate social safety net, poverty relief falls on
the church, non-governmental organizations, and their foreign donors. The problem of poverty in Kenya, Catholic leaders say, is one of a growing and young population coupled with the lack of job opportunities and land.

Land distribution is a contentious political issue that many say must be addressed in order to create real peace. As food prices rise around the world, land can make a huge difference for a Kenyan family. Even less than an acre allows families to grow their own food and sell some for income in a country where many children eat their only meal for the day at school.

Church programs help people get the most out of their land. The Ngong diocese, covering a large area south of Nairobi, has given a cow or goats to those catechists who have land.

“The church doesn’t pay like the government,” jokes catechist Ludovick Mbugua, who receives a small stipend like most catechists. Mbugua supports his family by farming. The cow gives him prestige, milk for his two children, and extra income. “The church takes the big percentage of our time, but we are happy with that,” he says.

The only problem, says Joseph Ole Mpaera, coordinator of the program, is that the diocese hasn’t figured out how to help catechists without land.

A growing percentage of Kenya’s 35 million people have moved from rural areas into the slums of cities seeking opportunity that isn’t there.

Grace Wariumu, 35, is a single mother of five children living in Nkaimurunya, a slum outside of Nairobi. She is a Kikuyu from the Central province who came to the city 20 years ago. A bed in her one-room home is divided off by a sheet. The main area holds a table, chairs, and shelf. Light comes in through a small window and the doorway.

Wariumu attempts to support her children by carrying water up from the river and selling 20 liters for 10 Kenyan shillings (about 15 cents). Full containers sit out in front of her home, and she says she hasn’t had much business.

Still, Wariumu hopes that education will allow her children to succeed in the future. She never attended school, but three of Wariumu’s children attend the local Catholic school thanks to the church’s support.

Survival economy

A boy who used to live at the St. John Bosco Rehabilitation Centre in Kitale, which cares for street children, is working for a local member of parliament and living in the servants’ quarters. The Catholic organization paid a garage to take on two other boys as apprentices, and after a year the garage hired the boys. “A lot of times when I talk to Americans, it’s hard for them to grasp that that is a success,” says Russ Brine, a Maryknoll lay missioner who runs the program.

“Youth extracted cash from people by setting up roadblocks during the clashes. Mwangi and others also say politicians paid youth in money and drugs to riot, burn homes, and kill.

The Waki Report corroborates the role of gangs, which politicians created for Kenya’s first multi-party elections in the 1990s, lost control of, and continue to hire. “Youth are both being exploited and have become exploiters themselves,” the report says.
The post-election violence, Mwangi says, taught the church a lesson: “The charge in the church today is to take youth ministry very seriously.”

That includes education, which is important for creating an informed electorate that votes on the issues rather than tribal alliances and fear.

In 2003 the Kenyan government opened primary education to all. Many, though, cannot afford a uniform or the modest school fee. In truth Kenya does not have an infrastructure ready to offer all of its children education. Classes can hold up to 90 students per teacher. Just as in the United States, many parents appreciate Catholic education because it offers discipline, academic rigor, and values.

Mary Mother of God Parish in Embulbul is expanding the Brother Beausang Educational Centre secondary school, but development coordinator Headmound Okari says his dream would be to open a vocational school. “It’s a challenge that we’re not able to see them through to employment or skills,” he says.

Informal or casual work—selling small goods, working in the fields for a day, or doing chores such as painting—is common but unsteady work. “This is big business for somebody…the local Wal-Mart,” says Hevi, pastor of the Embulbul church, laughing to keep his spirits up as he points out small stands selling food and other necessities. “This is the work most do also—stand around.”

Hevi’s Embulbul parish has experimented with soccer teams and income-generating projects like car washes, but he regrets not being able to give young people what they want: jobs. “The youth are full of energy and don’t know what to do with the energy. We have to try to direct it,” Hevi says.

St. Joseph Catholic Church in Jericho, another Nairobi slum, offers men vocational training in a carpentry studio. Father Jacques Alain, S.M.A. also hopes to start a sewing program “to buy the girls back from the street.” Computer training classes in the church hall help people qualify for better jobs.

What youth ministry in Kenya looks like is still being defined, but Mwangi is clear about its goal. “You challenge them,” he says. “What do you want to do in life? Don’t look at yourself as a failure; there’s still room for you to do something.”

Hope is alive

James Mulli, 18, the equivalent of a high school junior at Brother Beausang, wants to attend Harvard, become a lawyer, and return to Kenya to protect abused children. “I wouldn’t do it for money, but first off to defend the poor in society,” says Mulli, whose own family cannot pay his school fees.

Mwangi himself grew up in the slum of Embulbul. People once said, “Can a priest come from Bulbul? That’s unheard of,” he says. Now he is proud of his hometown and the church there.

Genevive Ayuma helps HIV/AIDS patients as a volunteer community health worker in Kitale. “When God has given you strength, you have the feeling you cannot sit down,” she says.

In a country torn by political and tribal strife, Kenyan Catholics live out their faith—providing hope for their country and the future church.

“I am confident that Kenyans have learned a lot from the violence…and would not allow a repeat of the same,” John Cardinal Njue said at the end of 2008, reports Kenya’s Daily Nation.

Kenyans refuse to let their mother abandon her children again. In the church’s work they answer the call of another poem recited by St. Joseph Freinademetz’s Peace Builders Club. “My fellow Kenyans, let us lead by example,” the students say, “for united we shall be the Kenya we want.”

USC on the web

For more information about the growing church in Kenya, visit uscatholic.org.