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First Centenary of the Church in Zaire

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FIRST CENTENARY OF THE CHURCH IN ZAIRE

In the course of its afternoon News-Bulletin on January 29 1980, Radio Vatican broadcast the following item :
KINSHASA. For the past seven months the Church of Zaire has been celebrating its centenary year. This was solemnly opened by the whole episcopacy of Zaire at Kinshasa, on Pentecost Sunday, June 3 ; tens of thousands of the faithful participated in the ceremony. The Centenary celebrations are intended to be an expression of fervent thanksgiving for the second coming of the Catholic Church to this country. In fact, on May 12 1880, the French Holy Ghost Fathers founded the Mission of Boma : on November 28 of the same year, the White Fathers established a mission a Mulweba, on Lake Tanganyika. So, quickly, from West to East, the Gospel spread in a remarkable way. It is the wish of the Bishops that, at once a sign of solidarity and of sharing, the Centenary Year should be seen not as a point of arrival but rather as a point of departure for a local Church, in announcing the Liberating Message of Jesus Christ and bearing witness to the Resurrection of the Lord, etc. etc.

* * *

To mark this event, it seems of interest to draw upon the General Bulletin of the Congregation of the time. One hundred years later, we find there ideas that are dear to us to-day : Internationality, Oecumenism, Welcome, for example . . .

In 1876 and in 1878, the Prefect-Apostolic of the Congo, Father Carrie, then resident at Landana journeyed along the Congo prospecting in view of a foundation : a journey penetrating further into the interior was undertaken in 1879. In a Report submitted to the Superior General, on November 23 of the same year, Father Carrie writes as follows :-

«Leaving Landana on November 2,1 arrived a Banana on the morning of the 3rd, from which I set out for the upper reaches of the river on the 5th. Thanks to the steamers of the Dutch Company and the kindness of Mr. Faro, a Portuguese merchant of Boma, I was able to go up the River Zaire to the

furthermost point at which it was navigable . . . We arrived at Vivi» (where Stanley set up his first post on February 1 1880).

«Shortly before our arrival, Mr. Stanley had given orders formally forbidding the acceptance of any white passengers aboard his steamers for Vivi : this was because he did not want what was going on there to be known. We were the first victims of this decision, which greatly hurt my travelling-companions, Mr. Faro and Mr. Martins. But, as we were determined to see this first settlement, we set out by native canoe».

«The chief engineer of the expedition, Mr. Van Schandel, received us most courteously. He admitted to me that Mr Stanley did not at all wish for white visitors. It was not however his intention to keep away missionaries, whose work could only complement his own».

I returned to Landana on November 23 . . .

My conclusion from this exploratory visit is, writes Father Carrie, that Boma will always be a necessary staging-post between the coast and the interior. Nowhere along the navigable sector of the river could a better site be found for a Mission . . .

«With such information it only remained for us to realise as soon as possible the plan projected since 1876. At that time Father Duparquet had got Father Carrie to purchase a suitable stretch of land along the river, and in 1878 had enclosed it to make sure it would be available for the mission . . .

«Mr. Faro, the Portuguese merchant we have already spoken of, gave a further piece of land to the work at Boma . . .

«On his return from his trip to Upper Congo, Father Carrie was kept busy getting together the material necessary for the establishment at Boma. In May, 1880, he was delighted to be able to set it up with Father Visseq, who had arrived in the mission on the 30th of March previous. In accordance with the wish of Father Duparquet supported by all the Fathers of the Mission, Father Schwindenhammer placed the new Community under the patronage of Our Lady of Victories».

This powerful Protectress, states the Mission Journal, has visibly blessed the Work confided to her care and has enabled it to triumph over difficulties of every sort.

«The first of these difficulties was the transport of materials. The wood for the buildings had been prepared at Landana : 900 planks; 300 joints or beams and several cases. It

was a not inconsiderable cargo . . . the Managing Director of the English firm of Hotton and Cookson, although himself a Protestant, agreed to transport the two Fathers free aboard his steamer, *Le Cabinda* and only asked 350 French francs for the carriage of their loads.

«At Boma itself, the Fathers could have expected a long period of discomfort while awaiting accomodation. In fact, they received a splendid welcome from Mr Faro, who offered them the most generous hospitality. *Having left Landana on May 5, writes Father Carrie, we arrived at Boma on the 12 th . . . We had a first-class welcome from the local people, all of whom are well-disposed to us and find it a pleasure to be useful to us. At the moment, writes Father Carrie again on May 30, the framework of our dwelling-house is nearly completed and erected. I think we shall have set up house in a month's time. Meantime, we are the guests of Mr. Faro . . .*

The Protestants themselves, he says later, are very well-disposed. Everyone admires the beauty and the practicality of our site: it is situated on the slope of a pleasant hillside . . . I find Mr Faro always charming to me: he does not wish me to move from his house, under pretext that we have not all we need: he also refuses any payment for the gracious hospitality of the past two months. Finally, on July 18, a Saturday, we went to sleep, for the first time, in our new house. We find ourselves very comfortable there . . . Where accommodation has been built for the children, I shall call Father Schmitt with a dozen of the little blacks of Landana, to start the work for children . . .

«In September 1880, the first buildings were finished and Father Carrie set out again for Landana. On the way back, he passed St. Antoine¹ where he had arranged with Fr Schmitt to meet him. Father Schmitt had been appointed by him, after consultation with the Mother-House, to take charge of the next foundation at Boma.

«Father Schmitt told the story of his journey in a letter published in *Missions Catholiques* (in its issue of January 7, 1881). In accordance with Father Carrie's instructions, he brought with him 10 young blacks from Landana. The group set out on September 22, accompanied as far as Malembe, about seven or eight miles from Landana, by other children who were on holiday . . .

¹ Mission of Santo António do Zaire (Angola).

«On October 12, Father Schmitt arrived at Boma, where Visseque awaited him. The 8th of February following the little community was completed by the arrival of Brother Cypriaque.

«A school had been opened almost at once and after a short time counted 20 pupils.

Also, without delay a start was made on planting trees and cultivating the land to help in the upkeep of the community. Father Carrie visited the foundation in 1881 and wrote as soon as he got back from the visit :

We have at Boma a fine work, far superior to anything the Protestants have so far achieved. This station of ours at Boma is not merely very useful but is most necessary for the Upper Congo.

«Likewise, from the beginning, the fruits of the ministry there were most consoling. *Since our arrival, Father Carrie stated in a report to the Propagation of the Faith of September 20, 1880, we have already baptised 9 children, one of whom, only two months old, died four hours later. A catechumen will be baptised shortly and eight others are preparing for the same grace : a young Christian is also preparing for First Communion. We hope to redeem here a number of first-class children. One of the chief princes of the country, Sakramback, has been to visit us and has promised that, as soon as the children's dwelling is finished, he will send his two sons to us. He has even offered us the island of Lediondo, which belongs to him, as a site for a plantation.*

The local king, the first of the eight kings of Boma, has also promised to send us his children when we are ready to receive them. May it be the Will of God that these happy beginnings produce fruit of salvation for these poor people! (August 8, 1880).

«The work at Boma has found another devoted friend in Mr. Greshoff, the General Director of all Dutch warehouses in the Congo. Although a Protestant, he uses his influence to render all the service he can to the mission. He has recently offered Father Schmitt part of the island of Boma which belongs to him, for plantations. *For my part, he said to Father Carrie, I am a Protestant. That was my dear Mother's religion. I assure you, all the same, that I have never felt as much interest in any religious undertaking as in the Catholic Mission of the Congo . . . Perhaps it is because I know the impeccable conduct of the Fathers of the Mission and the fine results they obtain? I am almost afraid to pose that question . . . I am also frightened to note such a great difference between two well-known Missions . . . I have a lot*

more to say to you; but I shall be at Landana in a few days time. I am most impatient to get there. I have need of friendship and affection, and where else can I find it if not amongst you? . . .

«Father Schmitt died on February 9, 1882, less than a year and a half after his arrival in Boma. He was one more victim in a long line, like the first missionaries in Guinea: Father Tisserant, Mgr Truffet, Father Arlabosse, Father Thou-louse and others. God exacted victims.

«Shortly afterwards Father Gaetan was appointed to take charge of the work of Boma, with Levadoux as assistant». (The General Bulletin, Vol. XI, p. 711-23).

* * *

Father Libermann, speaking to the novices at La Neuville, said of the beauty of a missionary vocation: *another advantage of this ministry over that at home is the amount of good that can be done on the Missions, much greater indeed than what could be achieved in a general way, here in the home country. When a missionary in Guinea has converted only ten people, he has done incalculable good, for he has planted the faith in that country: these ten will pass it on to others and the Church will have been founded. What a joyous privilege for a missionary to be the founder of a Church! How great will his reward be! . . .* (R. P. 5).

The mission of Boma was truly the grain of mustard-seed spoken of in the Gospel. One hundred years after its foundation, the Church in Zaire numbers nearly ten million Catholics (almost half the population), distributed over 6 archdioceses and 41 dioceses, according to the ANNUARIO PONTIFICIO for 1979. Besides 2378 priests from abroad there are 687 local ones; Brothers from abroad number 299, as against 373 native to the country; local Sisters are 1333 and religious sisters from overseas, 3715².

One of the institutes of which the Church in Zaire is justly proud is THE CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL FACULTY OF KINSHASA. As Vatican Radio said in the broadcast of which we have been speaking earlier: *«implanted in the Church of which it is a vital organism, the Catholic Theological Faculty of Kinshasa is playing its full part in the centenary and its objectives. It is one of*

² Actual statistics of 1975.

those faculties to which John Paul II attributes an "important work of research, namely, how to translate the Gospel message into the different cultural expressions of different nations". Translating the Good News of the Gospel into an expression of African culture is the task the Theological Faculty of Kinshasa proposes to pursue with increased determination in the coming year, in which a new centre will begin to be constructed . . . the Faculty relies upon Divine Providence, and its human instruments, to ensure that through her also the Church may deepen, renew, consolidate constantly her own special knowledge, that which she communicates to the man of to-day as a message of salvation».

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