



With Christ, ever faithful to Africa

Letter N° 9

Rome, 20th January, 2019

“I have seen the plight of my people.” “Whom shall I send?”

A visit to Uganda

From 24th November to 3rd December 2018, we, Superiors General of the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa and of the Missionaries of Africa, were in Uganda for a visit together. We had decided to go on this visit following the desire expressed by our two General Councils. They had expressed the desire that the commemoration of our Jubilee of 150 years of foundation would not end only in a big feast. Rather, our two Institutes would take up an action together. The choice of Uganda was dictated by several reasons. The Church in Uganda has been calling on religious congregations to help in the pastoral and spiritual care of the many refugees the country has welcomed from South Soudan. This call was also taken up by Pope Francis. Having heard that challenging call, we planned to go, see and feel for ourselves. As it was decided to hold the closure of the Jubilee year in Namugongo, Uganda, in December 2019, we also wanted to get in touch with some of the challenges the Church in Uganda was facing.

Accompanied by Fr. Aloysius Ssekamatte, Provincial of East Africa, Sr. Florence Mwamba, one of the Entity leaders for East and Central Africa, and Fr. Otto Katto from Lourdel House in Kampala, who came as a driver, the five of us travelled from Kampala to Arua on 26th November 2018. While in Arua, we drove to Yumbe to visit Bidi Bidi, one of the biggest refugee settlements. We then went on to Gulu, drove through Lira and Soroti to visit the Missionary of Africa community of Katakwi. From there, we continued, headed for Moroto and reached Tapac. On our way back, we stopped in Jinja for a night at the formation house of the Missionaries of Africa and arrived in Kampala on the 1st of December.

We were aware of being on a pilgrimage to a place where our predecessors had started their missionary work. It was also a pilgrimage to the land of the Uganda martyrs. In the end, it proved to be a pilgrimage to the heart of our missionary vocation as willed by Cardinal Lavigerie and Mother Marie Salome. It brought us to recognize in a renewed way who we are meant to be, and what is expected of us as missionaries in this part of Africa.

Before visiting the refugee settlement, we were taken to the headquarters of those working for Caritas; they welcomed and briefed us about their activities. We met two diocesan priests in charge of the parish that serves as the headquarters. There were also representatives of Catholic Relief Service (CRS). We saw many organisations who are doing so much for the refugees, teaching them how to produce food, to raise animals, bringing water to the settlement. The children are cared for and have safe spaces where to play. School goes on under large tents. But, at least in the camp we visited, none of these representatives is living with the refugees, sharing their daily lives. This is precisely what the Bishop of Arua stressed when we met with him. There are not enough priests or religious giving pastoral care. We felt that a presence among these people, sharing their life in the way both our Institutes understand our vocation, would be significant and would make a difference.

We all felt that our time in the settlement was too short. We would have liked to visit other camps. In all, there are more than a million refugees, and some are still arriving from South Sudan. We need to see how to deepen our knowledge of the situation. We cannot just continue, business as usual, as if we had never been there.

As we visited the Bishops of Arua, Gulu and the Vicar general of Moroto Diocese, we heard of the very small number of local priests and religious in both dioceses and the lack of vocations. In Gulu there was only one ordination to the diaconate last year, and the one ordained was a foreigner. In Moroto, since 2005, there has been no ordination. We heard of the trauma that years of violence and insecurity have left on the people of these regions, which are much less developed than the rest of the country. We know that in dioceses in the South of the country, where life is more comfortable, there are many local priests and many religious. And we heard the Lord say: "I have seen the plight of my people. Whom shall I send?" If our Founder were living today, such would be a place to which he would send us. Will we have the same courage as our ancestors? We rediscovered the beauty and the challenge of having a missionary vocation.

We admired the courage and dedication of the Missionary of Africa community of Tapac among the Karamojong. They live in a region of primary evangelisation, where the presence of missionaries is only eighteen years old. The Christian community is at its first stages. The town is far away. The house is in the mountains and is surrounded by fields. The girls are obliged into early marriage and are victims of Genital Mutilation. Many of them do not go to school. It became clear in our minds that to really serve the girls and the women, Tapac needs women religious. This call penetrated our hearts. We heard this message as from the mouth of Cardinal Lavigerie 150 years ago: "Go and be women apostles to the women. Your presence is vital to spread the Good News. Yes, whom shall I send?"

This pilgrimage brought us face to face with the radical nature of our missionary call. As we commemorate 150 years of our existence, let us ask for the grace of profound fidelity to our

vocation. May our Jubilee Year lead us from a time of festivities to a time of spiritual and apostolic renewal, so that faithful to our charism, we may be ready to answer God's call to go out to the people living on the peripheries. We pray that in taking us to the shrines and places where our brothers and sisters brought the faith and proclaimed the Good News, our pilgrimage also leads us to commit ourselves to serve in places where we can meet the suffering Christ calling us today.

With Christ, let us be ever faithful to Africa!

Your sister and brother in Christ and in Cardinal Lavigerie,

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