

MISSIONARY BETHARRAM IN AFRICA

INTRODUCTION

*“One day (...) Michael Garicoïts was upset by a certain face of God.
(...) This “impassioned of God” felt animated to TELL, to CRY OUT
this Name and this Face to the young, to the adults and to the poor of his time.
Some disciples came and continued gathering
to TELL and to CRY OUT, through their lives,
this same Love and this same Face,
every time and everywhere they settled with their apostolic, missionary,
educational communities...*

*...THEY ARE THE (RELIGIOUS) OF BETHARRAM
DISCIPLES OF SAINT MICHAEL GARICOÏTS”.*¹

If today, at the moment of celebrating the bicentenary of their Founder’s birth, the Religious of Betharram are missionaries even in Africa, this is because Michael Garicoïts was truly a great missionary, he who was “the superior of the four walls of a vast building”. We will start by looking at this.

Then, overcoming time and space, we will turn our eyes towards Africa and the Church that lives there today. A third chapter will explain our missionary work: what we are doing, what we should do, what is left for us to do... very humbly!

We will finish - but this could have been the following of the preceding part - by placing ourselves face to face with the great challenges that the Church in Africa must take on today.

“It has pleased God to make Himself loved”.

This message must be urgently discovered every day with our brothers on all the continents, and therefore also in Africa.

1. MICHAEL GARICOÏTS, MISSIONARY

Michael Garicoïts, missionary.

Is this title a provocation? Certainly not! In any case, not more so than the proclamation as “patroness of the Missions” of that “little Theresa” of Lisieux, whose centenary of birth to the heavens is being celebrated in this year 1997.

She lived for perhaps ten years at the end of her Carmel in Normandy before dying at the age of 24. Michael was not sedentary during his childhood and youth. Ibarre, Oneix, Saint-Palais, Bayonne, Aire, Dax and Larressore were the stages of his route towards the priesthood. And after only twenty months of ministry in Cambo, already he leaves. Direction: Betharram; for a 38-year stay, the longest in his life; and at the end, the encounter with the all loving Father.

Even if he often goes to Igon from Betharram, to see the Daughters of the Cross, his missionary area does not seem very vast. However his interest for the Missions is certain.

1.1 “MISSIONARIES OF BETHARRAM”

His first companions were missionaries. Michael Garicoïts distinguishes himself among them: he cannot manage to speak the Béarnaise language used by the people there. Fr. Guimon, on the other hand, speaks it with the same sureness and force as the Basque language of his parents!

¹ Jean Matéo, *La Vie Religieuse, Visage du Dieu de Tendresse*, Lourdes, Imprimerie de la Grotte, 1990, p. 11.

These “missionary” country preachers have the ambition to reach the entire population of a parish or region in three weeks: everything is calculated so as not to forget anyone. At the culmination of a Mission, a cross is erected at a crossway or in a public square. Also, the Fathers of Betharram try to form true Apostles able to continue the work undertaken: they propose, especially to the young, a confraternity of the Holy Virgin or an association of the Sacred Heart.

His first companions have a sort of jealous crisis when other Religious are called upon for the teaching service. The Founder must step in and almost impose his own schools: for him, the education of the young is a missionary work.

Michael Garicoïts puts a great deal of passion in forming his missionaries: spiritual conferences, discussions and various encounters are not lacking; each year, he animates their retreat. In particular, he knew how to help Fr. Guimon abandon the Jansenism of that period to preach that God who “was pleased to make Himself loved”; and this great preacher became the role model for the missionary.

1.2 MISSION(S) IN LATIN AMERICA

Simon Guimon was part of the first group which embarked for Argentina: he so desired this mission that he spoke to the Bishop and to other priests about it, before contacting the Superior.

The Religious of Betharram were sent for the *émigrés*, especially the Basque and Béarnaise ones. But can this suffice for such valid Apostles?

For the goal of “saving” the greatest number of Basques, Fr. Guimon asks that this group be called “Apostolic Missionaries”: this way, they would no longer depend on the Bishop of Buenos Aires and would be freer in their movements.

And then there are these Pampas Indios which menace the Argentine Republic: converting them would put things in their right place for everybody.

And the appeal also comes from Montevideo: must one cross another border?

As to this, Fr. Garicoïts gives a short refusal, but circumstantially: one must not “obfuscate the Ordinaries” of Bayonne and Buenos Aires; “the time has yet to come”, he writes to Fr. Didace Barbé.

Yet “the reaping is so beautiful! How I am tempted by it!”, he writes on June 29th 1860 to Fr. Etchanchu who does not dare commit himself to Montevideo.

1.3 ORIGIN OF MICHAEL GARICOÏTS’ INTEREST IN THE MISSION

Already in the school at Aire, Michael Garicoïts devoured with avidity the biography of Saint Francis Xavier, Basque and Navarrese like himself.

But the strongest influence, without a doubt, came from Msg. d’Astros, the bishop who ordained Michael. Does one need proof? On April 24th 1860, Michael Garicoïts uses a last argument to convince Fr. Etchanchu to go to Uruguay:

“And I have not forgotten that in 1827, Msg. d’Astros, who had more than thirty parishes without pastors in his diocese, almost like savages, sent an appeal to his major seminaries (Betharram and Bayonne) for the foreign missions; he encouraged, at the same time, to respond to this appeal by saying that the diocese could but gain from this generosity”.

More than thirty years later, and in the dusk of his life, Michael Garicoïts remembers this.

Msg. d’Astros had a great devotion for the Sacred Heart. He allowed the encounter between Jeanne Elisabeth Bichier des Ages and Michael Garicoïts by making the Daughters of the Cross come to Igon, nominating Michael to Betharram with the idea of making him the director of all (his) religious”. And above all, he is the one Michael Garicoïts goes to see after his retreat in Toulouse and who encourages him to found a religious family. Msg. d’Astros is always very present, even discreetly, at the origin of Betharram: how could his interest for the missions not be shared by our founder?

1.4 THE MISSIONARY ROLE OF THE BROTHERS

“The idea of Betharram, the idea of being associated to the good Fathers of Betharram, this touches me deeply”.

Arnaud Gaye, the first Brother who became part of the Congregation, expresses himself this way in 1840. The Founder of Betharram, despite the practices then, had great esteem for the Brothers:

“The Brothers have an enormous responsibility and vast duties; they participate in all that is of importance in the Community, in the priesthood itself: they are the arms, the feet of the priest: therefore they will have, if they wish, the greater part of the fruits of the preaching. A shoemaker Brother, in his shop, could perhaps obtain with his prayers all the happy results which could have been produced by a mission; and the sins of the missionaries will have been forgiven by God because of that shoemaker”.

“This is how one must look at things: one must practice, within the limitations of one’s position, the immensity of charity”.

It is interesting to listen to these words spoken by Michael Garicoïts; they show the role of the Brothers in Religious Life and that of the lay faithful in the Church.

Did Michael Garicoïts “anticipate” his times?

Staying within the limitations of one’s position, without going out of her Carmel, little Theresa will obtain many conversions and will become the Patroness of the Missions, reaching Francis Xavier, the ardent Far Eastern missionary.

And Vatican II affirms:

“The Church was made to extend the Kingdom of Christ on the entire world, for the glory of the Father (...) The lay persons, made participants in the priestly, prophetic and regal duty of Christ, have taken on their part in what is the mission of the entire People of God in the Church and in the world”.

1.5 MISSIONARY BETHARRAM, TODAY

“Apostolic activity in non-Christian countries is in harmony with the missionary zeal of Saint Michael. The Congregation therefore takes part in the evangelisation of non-Christian peoples”.

Our Rule of Life says this. But, in following what was said above, we can dare to affirm:

In harmony with Saint Michael, every Betharramite religious (and any person who lives his spirituality) can and must become a missionary.

“To be a missionary” does not oblige one to “leave for faraway”. Even if Betharram migrated from Europe to America, Asia and, finally, Africa, we form a family: if those who “left for faraway” have had “happy results” in their apostolate, do they not owe this to the prayers and sacrifices of those religious, old or sick, or those working in another place, sometimes even in a different continent?

Today, Betharram must be a missionary on all four continents.

In Africa, Betharram is a missionary through the sons of this continent as well as through those who came from Europe or America.

2. THE CHURCH IN AFRICA

To speak of Betharram in Africa, one must situate the Church in Africa, and first of all, the African continent itself. The task is not so difficult after the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops (Rome, April 10 - May 8, 1994) and the exhortation “Ecclesia in Africa” (Yaoundé, September 14, 1995).

2.1 A GLANCE AT THE PLURALITY OF AFRICA

A vast continent? Without a doubt, but not the biggest. The most piecemeal, assuredly: fifty or so countries for thirty million square kilometres.

If North Africa is easily classified as “Muslim” and “Arabic”, in other places the regional differences cross the countries. Let us look at the case of the Ivory Coast: 12 to 15 million inhabitants, sixty different ethnic groups, at least 25% of foreigners... Central and Austral Africa seem to have the vastest cultural ensembles: in certain countries, a national language can become the official language, replacing that of the ancient coloniser.

2.2 “WHAT HAS AFRICA BECOME?”

For one century, Africa was divided by the European colonial powers. They thought they were bringing “civilisation”; and however, they came to pillage the riches of this continent to industrialise Europe. Some time before, it was men that the Europeans came to get to conquer the “New World”. All this history still deeply marks this continent.

Around 1960, many countries became independent, at least in theory. But many battles are still being fought here and there and some populations are not satisfied with the boundaries inherited during colonialism.

This is how the African Bishops describe their continent:

“Without a doubt, the situation common to all of Africa is the fact that it is saturated with problems: in almost all of our nations, there is frightful misery, bad management of the rare available resources, political instability and social disorientation. The result is before our eyes: misery, wars and despair. In a world controlled by the rich and powerful nations, Africa has practically become an appendage without importance, often forgotten and neglected by all.”

“For many Synodal Fathers, today’s Africa could be compared to the man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho: he fell into the hands of bandits who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him for dead (cf. Lk 10,30-37). Africa is a continent where numerous human beings - men and women, children and youths - in some way are lying on the wayside, sick, hurt, impotent, marginalised and abandoned. They are in dire need of samaritans.”

Is the Church a Good Samaritan?

2.3 HISTORY OF AFRICAN EVANGELISATION

Africa is present in the New Testament through the flight from Egypt, the Cyrenean who helped Jesus on the way to Calvary, the Ethiopian baptised by Philip, and also the Africans present in Jerusalem on the Pentecost.

Tradition goes back to Saint Mark for the origins of the African Churches. These have given the universal Church doctors (Origen, Athanasius, Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine), the founders of monasticism and of the religious life in communities (Paul, Antoine Pacome), saintly women (Félicité and Perpétua, Monica), Popes (Victor 1st, Melchiade, Gélasius 1st). This life of the Church in Northern Africa has lost its strength; but even today, notably in Egypt and in Ethiopia, there are Christians who know that their Churches go back to the apostolic times.

The evangelisation South of the Sahara began during the 15th and 16th centuries:

- 1492, birth of the Church in Angola;
- 1518, Don Henrique, son of the king of the Congo, is consecrated by Leo X as the first autochthonous bishop of Black Africa.

But during the 18th century “for difficulties of various orders” which John Paul II doesn’t dare to mention, almost all the missions South of the Sahara are extinguished: due to the slave trade.

During the 19th century, evangelisation comes back, notably through societies of missionaries created especially for Africa. During those years, many Churches celebrate their first centenary. But we must not forget that the blood of the martyrs flowed: in Uganda in 1885 and 1886, and more recently in Zaire.

“The splendid growth of the Church in Africa and its achievements are due essentially to the heroic devotion of generations of disinterested missionaries”.

2.4 TODAY

Today, 14% of all Africans are Catholic:

- Most of the bishops are autochthonous; the number of dioceses is growing.
- More and more ordinations and many more candidates to the priesthood and religious life.
- Missionary institutes founded in Africa send their members to other continents; also bishops send priest as “Fidei Donum”.
- Religious institutes of Pontifical law are growing in this continent.

Through these signs, John Paul II measures the maturity of the Church in Africa.

But in an ailing continent, what does this rapid growth mean?

2.5 PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

Millions of Africans have yet to hear the Good News, which they have a right to. Since Word was made man and thus shown how much God loves man, it is within one’s own culture that each person can and must receive the Gospel.

How to announce the Word of God in such a poor continent?

*“As opposed to Latin America, Africa cannot allow itself the preferential option for the poor. The Church of Africa, a Church of the poor, has no other choice but to deliver the Message to the poor, on the example of its Master, by trying to push back the poverty that kills, and to make the poor come forth into the invisible Kingdom”.*²

John Paul II enumerates “some worrisome problems” for the Church: the sad and sombre future proposed to the young, the plague of AIDS, the wars, the refugees and the displaced persons, the international debt, the dignity of the African woman... But the Pope does not mention all the problems. We could add: the galloping demographic growth, urbanisation, the dangers to the family, the invasion of foreign cultural models via the media, etc...

2.6 THE CHURCH, FAMILY OF GOD

Faced with all these challenges, the Church needs all its members, like the African family where each has his part of the task. “Not only did the Synod talk about inculturation, but applied it by taking, for evangelisation in Africa, the idea-force of the Church Family of God”.

“In this Church Family of God, consecrated life has a special role, not only to indicate to all the appeal to holiness, but also to give witness of brotherly life in the community”.

2.7 TWO CENTENARIAN CHURCHES

The Religious of Betharram work in two African countries where the Churches have celebrated their centenary: on the Epiphany of 1995 for the Central African Republic; in September of 1995 for the Ivory Coast.

a) *The Central African Republic*: 612 000 Km², 3 million inhabitants united by a national language, *Sango*. The political history of this country, independent since 1960, is and remains very agitated.

The Catholic Church counts 500 000 baptised there, approximately 17% of the population. There are seven dioceses and only four Central African bishops. A small group of one hundred young people are welcomed to the Great Seminary in Bangui.

There are Lutheran or Baptist Christians there. Part of the population is Muslim. Groups of animists meet in the villages.

² Sibdé Sempore, “*Quelques observations sur les lineamenta*” in *Pentecote d’Afrique* n°3, December 1990, p.14.

Betharram in Central Africa is present in the diocese of Bouar with a community of four members: two residents in Niem, two others in the episcopal city.

b) The *Ivory Coast*: 332 000 km² for 3 million inhabitants in 1960, at the independence, today there are 4 or 5 times more; because of the multiplicity of ethnic groups, French is the official language, even if not all understand it.

The Catholic Church counts between 15 and 20% of the population (more if one holds to only the Ivorians), 14 dioceses and all the Ivorian bishops for the past 20 years. The large national seminary is full to bursting: each year 70 candidates are accepted, and more are refused... Other structures for the formation to the priesthood are being created. The candidates to consecrated life, boys and girls, are always more numerous.

The Muslims, who like to exaggerate, say that they are more than half of the country's population. But certainly, the followers of the traditional religions are still more numerous. Among the Christians, the Methodists are a large group; the Harrists, member of a local Church, the Baptists are also present. One still can find different sects in the urban areas and in the South of the country.

Betharram in the Ivory Coast, counts two communities: one, in the diocese of Katiola, works in the three parishes of the pastoral section of Djimini; the other is the community of formation and at the same time ensures the services of a parish in the diocese of Yopougon.

3. THE BETHARRAMITES IN THE MISSION IN AFRICA

If we have understood the intuition of Michael Garicoïts, and also the meaning of the mission, no one will be astonished by the fact that we refuse to distinguish between the Betharramite coming from elsewhere and the one living in his native country.

“The religious find in their consecrated life the privileged means for efficient evangelisation... Thanks to their religious consecration, they are, by far, voluntary and free to drop everything and go to announce the Gospel to the ends of the world. They are enterprising and their apostolate is often marked by originality, a genius which forces admiration. They are generous: they are often found at the fore-front of the missions, and they take the biggest risks for their health and their own lives”.

Are these words by Paul VI verified by the Betharramites in Africa? What is our place? Where are our “originality” and our “genius”?

In Africa, we remain Betharramites, and therefore, as much as possible, humble and modest...

3.1 “FOLLOWING THE INCARNATE WORD”

According to Vatican II *“the missionary activity is none other, is nothing less than the manifestation of God's plan, his epiphany and his realisation in the world and in its history”.*

Michael Garicoïts shows us “God's plan”:

“It has pleased God to make Himself loved, and while we were still his enemies. He loved us so much that He sent His only Son: He gave him to us to be the magnet which draws us to divine love, to be the model which shows us the laws of love, and to be the means of attaining divine love: the Son of God became man”.

Also in Africa we know that, joined to all our brothers of the Congregation, *“following the Incarnate Word, whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, we in our turn are consecrated and sent to be in the world, by our whole religious life, a sign proclaiming Jesus Christ”.*

These few citations must certainly suffice to tell our place in the mission and our Betharramite originality, in Central Africa or in the Ivory Coast, as everywhere else. We must dare to pursue our propositions: we must try to discover some particular colours, adapted to what we are living or are trying to be in this African land.

3.2 AS WITNESSES

Twenty years ago, Paul VI said how much witnesses were necessary during our times. Even farther back in his first letter, Peter asks of us “good conduct in the nations!”

“Called to co-operate with the Son of God who has become one of us to save us all, we wish to share in the ‘joys and the hopes, the sadness and the anguish of men’. In this way, we remain sensitive to the needs of our contemporaries being in close and humble contact with their lives”.

Far from fixing quantifiable objectives as merchants desirous of penetrating new markets would, we share the program of life of all our Betharramite brothers; we adapt it to our way of life.

Even where there is no First Aid, firemen or even a working ambulance, one must not hesitate to travel 45 kms by night on a bad road to bring a five month old girl to the hospital and thus save her from meningitis; even if there was a celebration for confirmation that morning and another would follow the next day. Too bad for the lack of sleep!

The witness of charity, if silent, is eloquent. Even if the incident goes back twenty years, we still hear an old man of the village in the Parish of Niakara tell us: *“I was at the village, sick; nobody worried about me; the sisters of Niakara saw me, they took me to the dispensary; and since we had to go to the hospital, they entrusted me to the Sisters of Katiola. One leg was amputated, but today I am healed thanks to the sisters; I too wish to follow their same path, become a Christian like them, therefore I ask for Baptism”.*

3.3 THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF CHRIST THE SAVIOUR

“There is no true evangelisation if the name, the teachings, the life, the promises, the Kingdom, the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, Son of God, are not announced”, Paul VI said. To repeat the Word of God, to insist all the time, this is also our mission. We try to accomplish it with the precious help of catechists.

Sometimes the Word is expanded in an astonishing way. Let us allow a youth of the village in the parish of Nyangourougonon express himself : *“Last year, I was in Landédougou, only to see the Easter of the Christians. I participated in the vigil, from 11 p.m. to 5 a.m. While listening to the Word of God, that night, I learned of God’s goodness towards us: he is so good that he wanted his only Son to become man like us and save us”.*

Thus, all of a sudden, this youth understood the love of God, the greatness of the Incarnation, and also the salvation proposed to us: that is a lot! But who pushed this man towards the Easter of the Christians rather than to the great traditional funerals which so attract the Djiminis? The Mystery of the grace which calls one!

3.4 THE ACTION OF THE SPIRIT

Some missionaries believe that those who are awaiting the Word of God for thousands of years can wait a little longer. No! It is urgent! The Kingdom of God is always near.

They are there, the new Macedonians, those who say to us: “Visit us, come to our aid!” In the Djimini country, in each of the three parishes, men came to look for us: “Come to our villages also, come teach us!”

While waiting for these calls, we listen to Michael Garicoïts :

“I know that God unceasingly speaks to the depths of hearts... I know that there is a sort of ceaseless fermentation, agitated, kept alive by the creating hand and which asks, as from an infinite distance, from amidst the darkness, the slumber and the noises of all kinds, for an answer, to abandon oneself to the divine insistence of God”.

In the Ivory Coast, in Central Africa, in many African countries, to satisfy man's thirst, to answer their right to know the Word of God is an imperative duty. "Bad luck upon me, should I not announce the Gospel!"

In other countries, unjust laws and wars block the announcement of the Good News; and sometimes the Spirit accompanies the witnesses until the gift of their lives, the supreme proof of love: let us remember what is happening in the areas of the great African lakes, in Algeria and elsewhere. Even close to us, the blood of priests and religious persons has flowed...
"The blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christians", Tertullian the African said.

3.5 CONVERSION

Thanks to the Spirit, the annunciation of the Word brings "to conversion, that is to say to the complete and sincere adhesion to Christ and to his Gospel through faith. Conversion is a gift of God, an action of the Trinity". And we are joyful witnesses of this action by the spirit. Thus also in Nyangourougonon.

In this corner of Africa there is no truly natural death: each decease must have an explanation. When John loses his daughter, he finds someone to propose to him, for the price of a chicken, to find and kill the person who made his child die; but in speaking to the catechist John discovers how, by following that path, he goes against the love for our neighbour; also because the little one is still alive, because she had received baptism from the community. And John manages to resist the pressures of his family.

It is not always like this; not all have the chance to find a Christian able to counsel them well, next to them.

3.6 BAPTISM

Some are astonished by the fact that not all catechumens reach baptism: the contrary should be surprising, and even abnormal! However, to those whose hearts have been pierced while awaiting the Word of God, the answer is the same: *"Repent: be baptised in the name of Jesus; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit"*.

In the past, some baptised too quickly, following the adage *"outside the Church, no salvation!"* Today, some believe that baptism is superfluous, who believe that faith and conversion suffice. For us, the Easter period and the baptisms which accompany it are often great moments of joy. Joy also in the confirmation given by the Bishop during the same period. Sometimes also joy for other sacraments, joy before certain decisions, such as the following: "Through baptism, I have completely entrusted myself to Jesus: I want to continue on this path and celebrate my Christian marriage".

Happiness when faced with the good things that God accords to his children. Happiness in seeing the family of God grow and move towards the Kingdom.

3.7 NEW COMMUNITIES

To found new communities, this is part of the *ad gentes* mission. The communitary project of the Betharramites in Djimini country (14-05-1991) inscribes this objective among its own. In truth, this is but a continuity: after his first visit to the Betharramite team in Black Africa, the Superior General at the time, Fr. Joseph Mirande was enthusiastic:

"I return from Black Africa. I found Betharram there... At Ferké, I found a truly Betharramite work. It is truly missionary in the real meaning of the word. First, it contributes efficiently to implanting the Church in the Ivory Coast. The Cours Normal Saint-Michel prepares teachers for the schools of the mission... Our Fathers take care in ensuring an education, as vast as possible, to their students, such attentive spiritual formation to make them true lay missionaries".³

³ *Nouvelles en Famille*, n° 133-134, February-March 1964, p. 203.

3.8 COMMUNION IN THE CHURCH

Forming new communities can only be accomplished when linked to the local Church, following the episcopal directives. The Betharramites do this in placing themselves at the complete service of the Bishops. Again, we should read Fr. Joseph Mirande's, the Superior General, rendering:

“Betharramite, the work is such because it is not our work and we do not seem to work for ourselves. Our brothers work, but it is for the Mission, the Bishop, therefore as auxiliaries, as instruments according to the words dear to Saint Michael”.

From the beginning, in fact, he

“wanted to present the Bishop with priests entirely disposed to fill all the tasks he wanted, completely obedient, always ready to say: Adsum! Here I am! This is the true character of the Betharramite”.

And even today our Rule of Life demands :

“Servants of the Gospel, our missionaries will remember that they are doing the work of the Church. They will work in perfect harmony with their fellow missionaries and with all those who consecrate themselves to the great work of the missions having in view only the glory of God and the good of the Church”.

“The missionaries, faithful to the spirit of Saint Michael, will be auxiliaries of the bishops, not only with regard to evangelisation but also in the formation of national clergy”.

3.9 COMMUNITIES AT THE BASE

In our Churches, we can see the birth of communities. We wish them to be evangelising.

We speak of *“Ecclesial Communities at the Base”* or *“Christian Communities at the Base”* in the diocese of Yopougon, and therefore in the Parish of Adiapodoumé; and the same, recently, of those groups forming in the city of Dabakala; little by little they become *“centres of Christian formation and missionary diffusion”*.

Elsewhere, in the Djimini country, the villages are small and the Christians few: each community can form a family, a simple community at the base. With the Bishop of Katiola, we hope for communities

- praying and therefore linked to Jesus Christ,
- loving and therefore signs of God's love for man,
- responsible.

In a continent where the place of the family, the greater family, is primordial, it is to be hoped for, necessary even, that each community form a family, a cell of the Church-Family of God.

Doesn't this touch upon inculturation?

4. INCULTURATION, INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE, DEVELOPMENT: CHALLENGES FOR THE CHURCH AND FOR BETHARRAM IN AFRICA

Have we already mentioned the essential points of the mission of Betharram in Africa? Perhaps! We have but followed, step by step, chapter 5 of the admirable Encyclical by John Paul II on the Mission of the Redeemer.

We will continue our itinerary with the same guide; looking at challenges which, without being proper to Africa, demand the right solutions. Inculturation, inter-religious dialogue and development will hold our attention in a greater way.

4.1 CHRISTIAN AFRICANS, AFRICAN CHRISTIANS

To become a Christian must one renounce one's culture? There was a time when the missionaries would answer affirmatively, at least in their way of acting. Today, how many of our Djimini brothers find their heritage received by their ancestors as "satanic"!

However, one must answer courageously: the African when becoming a Christian has the right and the duty to remain African; this should be said of any people in Africa.

One could have said, even in Betharram, that inculturation was stylish. If this is true, the style is old, dating back to the Apostle of the pagans: Jew among Jews, pagan with the pagans, sometimes using the thoughts of the rabbis, sometimes citing pagan authors and, by doing this, making them enter into Revelation!

Inculturation has always been practised by the Church: we should remember the first Assembly in Jerusalem. "*Inculturation is a right and not a concession. Inculturation is an irruption and an epiphany of the Lord which produces de-stabilisation*"; this was said by Msg. Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya, Archbishop of Kisangani (Zaire), during the Synod for Africa.

The word "inculturation" itself had problems in entering the official discourse of the Church, including the *Redemptoris Missio*. On the other hand with the *Ecclesia in Africa*, and certainly under the pressure of the Bishops themselves, the word finds its rights and its foundations. Let us keep the following in mind:

"The Synod considers inculturation as a priority and urgency in the life of the particular Churches for the true enrooting of the Gospel in Africa, 'a necessity for evangelisation', 'a path towards full evangelisation, one of the major bets for the Church in the Continent with the nearing of the third millennium".

As the Word was made flesh and (he) lived among us" (Jn 1,14), thus the Good News must be inscribed in the middle of the path of those who listen to it. Inculturation, to be precise, is the insertion of the evangelical message in the cultures...

Inculturation of the message can but enter the 'logic' proper to the Mystery of Redemption...

Inculturation also has deep links with the Mystery of Pentecost".

But these passages should be read thoroughly! Then we would discover the traits of the spirituality of Saint Michael Garicoïts; especially the strong link between Incarnation and Redemption:

"at the moment He entered the world animated by the Spirit of God His Father, He took the place of all victims".

For our Founder, Incarnation begins, somewhat, Redemption;

"What annihilation: God-man!

But what elevation: man-God!"

Of course, one must not look for the word 'inculturation' in Michael Garicoïts. Nor in our Rule of Life! But, however, "*we are conscious of the cultural, social and religious values in the different human spheres, and seek patiently to recognise in them the signs of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ*".

John Paul II requires this same attention, and therefore inculturation "*by missionaries originating from other Churches and other countries*".

Concretely, what does this mean? Entire books are needed to answer this question; and many have yet to be written! Let us draw out some elements.

- In a country where snake is considered more appetising than fish, how can one interpret Mt 7,10?
- We all know that the disciples of Emmaus had an ardent heart while they listened to the Resurrected One; but for a Djimini (and often in this region of Africa) "to have a warm heart" means to be angered!
- The prayer for the dead, on November 2nd, does it need a procession to the cemetery? And does it impose the creation of cemeteries where tradition does not foresee the need (as in Djimini and with the Senufo)? The prayer for the dead and the cult of the dead need not forcefully pass through retreat on the tomb...

- What does the celebration of marriage in a church mean, organised around some questions and answers, where tradition requires ceremonies lasting several days and renewed in more years? But, at the same time, how to take into account a traditional marriage which does not always respect the freedom of the spouses and which evolves rapidly towards its own death?

This means that each pastoral agent, autochthonous or foreign, must find the best way to tell the faith, to live the faith within a certain people. To add a dance step or to introduce a new local musical instrument, is not enough to ‘inculturate’.

Inculturation touches the soul of the people. This is why one must near the people where one is sent. To his sons, Michael Garicoïts gives the example of the Jesuits:

“They put a dress on and a rabat, they become lay people, mandarins, all with the same ease, and by doing this they follow the spirit of their rule: they become everything for everyone, for the greater glory of God”.

4.2 DIALOGUE WITH OTHER RELIGIONS

The African is called upon to become Christian while remaining African. The necessary inculturation requires a dialogue of faith with the culture and first of all with the traditional religions.

This dialogue is a daily obligation for the Christians in the villages: they do not live far from their un-baptised relatives. (The time has ended when, ignoring the teachings in the letter by Diognète, the missionaries at Korhogo, at Katiola, elsewhere as well, tried to build ‘Christian villages’ cut from the others). A fact which occurred at Christmas in 1995 will help us understand.

For a good meal for a feast day, one must have meat: here comes a happy young hunter with a young antelope on his shoulders. But bringing this animal into the village requires certain rites, and our man did not know this. What to do? Should one accept a simulation of the return from the hunt so that the elders of the village can repair the forgetfulness? Or refuse despite the menace of death which would fall on the head of the hunter’s mother? Both the hunter and the owner of the rifle, both involved, are Christians; but not the mother. The two men accept that the elders do what they deem to be correct; they follow their gestures as spectators. But, when the ceremony is finished, the roles change and the ‘elders’, in turn, look on; with the holy water the two young people pray God, the Father of Jesus Christ: asking Him to send away all the evil forces from the village and allow them to live in peace, all the inhabitants of the village. At the end, comments are heard: *“What you have just done is not something small. We do not ask you to act like us all the time. But our fathers showed us that in some cases there are some gestures which must be done; if you also make your own, we are in agreement with you and we can live in peace together”.*

Usually, dialogue with traditional religion could use this type of path: when removed from all insult and provocation, each, at the same time, respects the other and calmly confirms the differences, not only tolerance but also esteem are reciprocated. Sometimes even, the guardians of the customs reproach those who uselessly and meanly provoke the Christians.

Dialogue with traditional religions is also easier because usually they have neither temples nor hierarchies; and above all because almost everywhere men believe in only one God; limiting the monotheistic religions to three should cease, there are more; and Revelation has not put aside completely the Africans... In Yaoundé on September 15th 1995, before John Paul II, a lay person from Cameroon hoped that:

“The Supreme Being that our ancestors served and that many of us serve in different ways, should appear on African land with the characteristics of God, Father of all men, of whom you are the herald. (...) It is urgent that dialogue between (Christianity) and (traditional religion) be activated, for the unification of the faithful Christian on African land and for the blossoming of

those most noble aspects of our fathers' faith. In this way, Africa will be a chance for Christianity, and Christianity will be a chance for Africa".⁴

On this continent, Islam co-exists, a majority in some countries. In general, in the cities and villages of the Ivory Coast, our relationship with the Muslims is good. Even if sometimes we hear criticism, here and there, a 'concurrence', and some calumnies, these however remain isolated cases. However, true dialogue does not exist, but rather tolerance.

How difficult the Islamic-Christian dialogue is elsewhere is well known: think of Sudan or Algeria. "*But if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have?*": with this small verse, Msg. Henri Tessier, Archbishop of Algiers, justifies the need for dialogue with the Muslims, even in the tragic situation happening in Algeria.

To dialogue is to love, love to the very end, love to giving one's life. How can one not think about those religious persons, the bishop himself, victims of the Algerian conflict since 1992? Today they live in love, in God, forever; these and the many others who consecrated their lives to God and to their brothers on the African continent.

4.3 TO PROMOTE DEVELOPMENT AND TO EDUCATE CONSCIENCES

To love is to be interested in man, in all men, all of man. Especially in a poor continent, where poverty is present everywhere, among the duties of the missionaries, and at the same heart of evangelisation, is where complete human development can be located.

The teachings of Paul VI is always up to date; John Paul II takes it up again in *Ecclesia in Africa*:

"Between evangelisation and human promotion - development, liberation - there are many deep ties. Ties of an anthropological nature, because the man to be evangelised is not an abstraction, but is subject to social and economic questions. Ties of a theological nature, because we cannot separate the plan of Creation from the plan of Redemption, which reaches the concrete situations of injustice to be fought and justice to be restored. Ties of an eminently evangelical nature which is that of charity: how in fact to proclaim the new commandment without promoting justice and peace, the true, authentic growth of man?"

Already during his times, our Founder had well understood, and even better than some of his religious, that evangelisation in the countryside had to come through development: from here the schools and the colleges he created.

Today, in African land, faithful to the Church and to Saint Michael, the Betharramites are interested in the promotion of man, in Central Africa and in the Ivory Coast. One could mention many projects realised with their help; we shall mention only some... In Central Africa, approximately one thousand children have been educated thanks to the religious of Betharram; there is also a dispensary created for them. When the state cannot respond to the needs of its inhabitants, often the Church tries to come to the population's help. In the Ivory Coast, the Betharramites have begun by forming future teachers; even today, even discretely, they favour concrete action so that man can live in a more dignified way. Everywhere we try to help men up on their feet so that they may walk by themselves.

But we should not fall in error: to the one thirsty for God, it cannot suffice to propose water from a well or from a dam!... To announce the Good News is to participate in the development of man.

CONCLUSION: LOVE AND HOLINESS

Must one conclude? Perhaps not!
Has everything been said? Or too much?

⁴ Fr. Titi Nwell, "*Au nom de la religion traditionnelle*", in *Mission de l'Eglise* n° 111, April 1996, p.64.

In any case, the mission is not over; it never ends: we are sent to the ends of the world, every day till the end of time.

We can always love.

We can always become holy.

Love

In *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II quotes an ancient author:

“Love is and remains the motor of the mission; it is the only criteria according to which all must be done or not done, changed or not be changed. This is the principle which must guide our action, and the goal to which it must lead. When we act according to charity or when we are moved by charity, nothing is a disadvantage and everything is good”.

And Michael Garicoïts founded everything on love:

“Love, there is the divine seed which must grow in the hearts. If it is not there, nothing can be done”.

Holiness

To love, to love till the end, is to go as far as to give, deliver, one’s life; Jesus shows us the way.

“The true missionary is the saint”, John Paul II affirms.

Let us listen to Michael Garicoïts again, in the words of his times:

“To work for our own salvation and perfection, and the salvation and perfection of our neighbour, is our element.

To work at it fully is for us to live;

To work negligently at it is to languish; not to work at it at all is death.

To work to avoid hell, to achieve heaven, to save souls which was so costly to Our Lord (...): what a job! Does it not ask for all the care? Can we be afraid to do too much? Will we ever do enough?”

Let us help each other to love to the point of becoming saints, united in one Saint, three times a Saint, to Love.

Michael Garicoïts opened the way for us!

Fr. Beñat OYHENART, s.c.j.