
THE EDMUNDSTON-BOMA COMMUNION



My Bishop's Journal entry for August 16 on the new 2000-2001 pastoral year gave me the opportunity of warmly welcoming on behalf of our Diocese and in my own name Father Joseph Numbi Phako of the Diocese of Boma in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Today I would like to give you an idea of the unfolding of the apostolic «adventure» and to mention our respective expectations.

AN UNEXPECTED OFFER

In the spring of 1999 the Secretariate of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops sent me and two other dioceses an offer made by Bishop Cyprien Mbuka, Auxiliary Bishop of Boma and in charge of the Fidei Donum priests, to send us three priests, since the diocese of Boma has over 200 priests to look after the pastoral and spiritual needs of his thirty parishes; but above all, Bishop Mbuka was looking for the priests of Fidei Donum to experience a totally new missionary experience in a North American diocese and country. Who was I, to decline such an offer? I therefore consulted different national, diocesan, and parish authorities and then replied to Bishop Mbuka in the affirmative. We were willing to welcome priests on a one-year basis, following which an evaluation would be made to allow both parties to commit to a longer term.

MAJOR OBSTACLES

Does not enter the country whoever wants! There are not only formalities to go through but also strict requirements to meet. And not every African country has a Canadian embassy where one can get a visa. Besides, when the country in question is in a state of civil war, one cannot travel around the country as through the Maritime provinces of Canada. It takes much time and money, determination and patience to go from Boma to Kinshasa, and thence to Abidjan, Ivory Coast. Then there are the medical controls one must go through at both Kinshasa and Paris. I had strongly advised that the priests be here by July 1, 1999, but it was impossible to meet that deadline. As we had already reached October 1, the entire project had to be postponed to the following spring, partly because I did not want to be responsible for the climatic shock to our new partners.

EVEN GREATER OBSTACLES

If customs and immigration requirements were major obstacles to be tackled head-on, other pressures, especially from the outside, and not minor ones, were regularly applied. I therefore passed them on to Bishop Mbuka, who was not hampered by them; he never became discouraged, and these pressures helped us better specify our apostolic project. Some argued: «The coming of African priests is not a solution to the scarcity of priests in our diocese.» Granted. However, if in the short term the coming of a foreign priest can help fill a void, the diocese of Edmundston must still boldly and forcefully develop a priestly vocation pastoral ministry; and it behooves each community to discern in its midst who is being called by the Lord and to support that person in his enterprise. I was also told: «We must not strip the new African Churches; and once these priests have come, they do not return to their native country.» Maybe so. There is a real danger that these men really feel at home, here, that they find comfort and security, but there are also those who come to us with otherwise motivated. Other arguments: «What with our new parish pastoral teams, will they be able to adapt?» «And

what about their promotion of women's rights?» «What will they think of the situation of our families, of common law unions, of divorce and separation?» There were other arguments still, especially of a cultural kind, and these I submitted to the appropriate people.

A DEMANDING ARRANGEMENT

I asked Bishop Cyprien Mbuka to pick from among his priests men who were in good health, who can work in a pastoral team composed of men and women, priests, religious, and lay people, confreres of apostolic holiness. Thus it was that Fathers Joseph, Edgar and Crépin were designated to come to Canada. In the meantime, since the Yarmouth Diocese had applied for two priests, Fathers Edgar and Crépin were appointed to Yarmouth and on July 10 of this year Father Joseph arrived in Edmundston.

OBJECTIVES OF THE YEAR 2000-2001

I wrote as follows to Father Joseph: «In our beloved Church of Edmundston, continue to have strong bonds with the Church of Boma; continue being a man of prayer, a servant of the Word, and a peacemaker.» While he is with us, especially in the St.-Léonard\St-Léonard-Parent\Notre-Dame-de-Lourdes region, Father will continue to familiarise himself with our part of the world, with its customs and culture; he will also help us determine the kind of new missionary cooperation between our Churches, as Bishop Mbuka declared in 1999. If for many years our Church was able to furnish priests, brothers, sisters and lay people to mission countries for all kinds of apostolates (remember Father Roger Dionne notable commitment to mission work in Peru with the Québec Foreign Mission Society - PME) it will doubtless be possible to find together new approaches to communion and solidarity between our two Churches.

ONLY A BEGINNING

In his remarkable encyclical *The Mission of Christ the Redeemer* on the value of the call to mission, Pope John Paul II firmly asserted that «the mission of Christ is still a long way from being accomplished, that a cursory look at the world shows that this mission is still at its beginnings, and that we must engage all our energy to this task. The Spirit himself presses us to proclaim the God's mighty works. The mission is the affair of every Christian.» And he added with courage and enthusiasm: «*The Church has never had more than now the opportunity to bring the Gospel, by witness and word, to all men and to all peoples. I see rising the dawn of a new missionary era which will turn into a radiant day and bear much fruit if all Christians, especially the missionaries and the young Churches, respond with generosity and holiness to the calls and challenges of our times.*» [*Redemptoris missio*, 1, 92] Onward together, then, for the mission! And have a good pastoral year!

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Bishop of Edmundston

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