

## **The History of the Conference of Visitors in Africa and Madagascar (COVIAM)\***

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The origin of COVIAM goes back several years, and is linked to the numerous African vocations to the CM, which generally began in the 1980s. By that time, some missions had already begun projects for collaborating in the formation of our candidates, such as Congo (then called Zaire) and Cameroon. The Vincentians of Cameroon had sent some young men to the Internal Seminary of the Vice-Province of Congo in Bokongo, and others to the scholasticate of Saint Vincent in Kimwenza. But they wanted to do more at the pan-African level and, for that purpose, they did their best to patiently look for adequate ways to collaborate.

During the Meeting of Visitors of the Congregation of the Mission in Rio de Janeiro, July 1989, the Visitors with confreres in Africa sought to set up certain structures to allow interchange and collaboration among the Vincentians in Africa in the field of formation. For this reason, and with the encouragement of the General Curia, the Visitors of Africa and Madagascar decided to organize a meeting for Vincentian formators in 1990 in Kinshasa (Congo). This meeting was actually held in the “Theresianum” of the Carmelite fathers, from 19-22 April 1990. It was the first important meeting of Vincentians working in Africa to be devoted to the formation of our candidates.

The participants in that meeting were Frs. Léon Lauwerier, Assistant General for the Missions, along with representatives of seven provinces or regions. These were Cameroon: Claude Lautissier, Visitor of Paris, and Hubert Lignée, Superior of the Cameroon Mission; Madagascar: Pedro Opeka, Director of the Antananarivo Scholasticate; Ethiopia: Leonardus Dobbelaar, Vice-Visitor, and Berhane Meskel, Director of the Asmara Philosophy Scholasticate; Eritrea: Hagos Tewolde, Director of the Internal Seminary at Hebo; Mozambique: Luciano Costa Ferreira, Vice-Visitor; Nigeria: Matthew Barry and Urban Osuji, respectively Director and Vice-Director of the Ogobia Internal Seminary; Zaire: Jan Van Broekhoven, Vice-Visitor, Henk de Cuijper, Assistant Director of the Bokongo Internal Seminary; Stanislaw Szczepanik, Spiritual Director of the Kimwenza Scholasticate and myself, at that time Rector of the same Scholasticate.

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\* This conference was given in Enugu (Nigeria), at a meeting of COVIAM (2-6 May 2000), by Fr. Janusz Zwolinski, at that time, Visitor of Congo and president of COVIAM. The current president of this Conference of Visitors is Fr. Dominique Iyolo, Visitor of Congo. Those interested in reading information about COVIAM since 2000 can consult editions of *Nuntia*: March 2002, July-August 2001, June 2001, July-August 2000, May 2000.

During this meeting the participants had the opportunity to come to know each other, to share opinions on the questions related to the formation of our candidates in Africa. They also strongly expressed their desire to collaborate in that field. The participants in this meeting particularly wished that:

- a) a commission of formation composed of the Assistant for the Missions and the representatives of each province and region be created;
- b) they start planning to establish a common theologate for Africa, starting in Kinshasa for African students who would study theology at the OMI (Oblati di Maria Immacolata) theologate.

To respond to these desires, the Superior General, Richard McCullen, asked that the Visitors most interested in the project of an inter-African theologate should hold a meeting, that is, involving Nigeria, Cameroon, Zaire (Mozambique was also interested but that Vice-Province had no students in theology yet). Their purpose would be to study more precisely the practical ways for its implementation. This meeting took place in Paris on 16 December 1990 and had as participants: Frs. Léon Lauwerier, Assistant for the Missions, Claude Lautissier, Visitor of Paris and Jan Van Broekhoven, Vice-Visitor of Zaire. Mark Noonan, Visitor of Ireland, did not attend this meeting. He communicated by fax that Nigeria would not participate in this project since the OMI theologate was not affiliated to a Roman university.

The meeting was informed of the measures taken by Zaire (the acquisition of a building site near the Scholasticate of Kimwenza, the agreement of the local bishop) and made the following decisions (but without much conviction, since Nigeria was not participating):

- a) the construction in Kimwenza of an autonomous theologate separate from the scholasticate, with a capacity of 40 students;
- b) a gradual beginning; in 1993 students for the first year of theology would start by attending courses at the OMI theologate;
- c) that the Superior General would exercise the ultimate responsibility for this interprovincial scholasticate (theologate), and that he would appoint the formators.

Later, in February 1991, Fr. Myles Rearden, from Ireland, in charge of the Nigerian mission, visited Kinshasa and became enthusiastic about the project. He had learned that the OMI theologate had started the steps to be affiliated to a Roman university. In fact, the final decision was left to the Irish provincial council.

While that decision was being awaited, it was only on 28 February 1992 that the Assistant General for the Missions, rejected the idea. Then the Province of Zaire proposed the following:

- a) that the Visitors concerned propose to the Superior General the names of candidates for the formators team;
- b) after that, that the Superior General appoint the rector, who would promptly start to develop the program of formation and contact the provinces to establish a fund for construction and functioning;
- c) finally, that the construction of the buildings should begin at first with a small house of some 12 rooms, so that the seminarians could begin in October 1993.

During the General Assembly of 1992, the Visitors and Vice-Visitors of Africa and Madagascar discussed the project again and clarified the ways of bringing it about. It was also during this Assembly that they decided to create COVIAM (the Conference of Visitors of Africa and Madagascar) by assigning me the responsibility of president, with the specific task of preparing the Statutes of this organization.

On 1 May 1993, after reading the Statutes of similar bodies (CLAPVI, CEVIM) and after having consulted a few Visitors, I sent a draft of the Statutes to the Visitors, Vice-Visitors and Regional Superiors of Africa and Madagascar, asking for their reactions and proposed amendments. In the same letter, I also wrote about the initiative of Fr. Victor Bieler, Assistant for the Missions, to plan the next meeting of Visitors interested in the project of a common theologate, in order to confirm or not the realization of this project, because of the very confused and uncertain socio-political situation that had developed for some time in the Republic of Zaire.

Such a meeting was organized by the Superior General, Robert P. Maloney, and by the Assistant for the Missions, Victor Bieler, on 29 June 1993 in Paris. Unfortunately, because of the difficult situation that Zaire was facing, the decision was made not to begin the theologate yet, but to continue to study other possibilities of collaboration.

During that meeting, the Superior General expressed the desire to assemble in Kinshasa, in June 1994, the Visitors of Africa and Madagascar to discuss the problems that the Congregation was facing in this part of the world.

This first assembly of COVIAM took place in Kinshasa from 24-30 June 1994. Those who participated in this assembly were: Robert P. Maloney, Superior General, Victor Bieler, Assistant for the Missions, and representatives

of the following provinces, vice-provinces and regions: Cameroon: Yves Danjou, Visitor of Paris; Mozambique: Luciano Costa Ferreira, Vice-Visitor; Nigeria: Timothy Njoku, Regional Superior and Michael Edem; Madagascar: Gonzague Danjou, Visitor, and François Benolo; Eritrea: Zerajohannes Weldemariam, Vice-Visitor, and Zeracristos Yosief; Ethiopia: Theo Van Ruijven; Zaire: Janusz Zwolinski. Several presenters developed the theme of Vincentian identity in Africa and Madagascar.

This conference adopted the Statutes of COVIAM and elected as its executive council: Frs. Janusz Zwolinski, president; Timothy Njoku, vice-president; and Zeracristos Yosief, secretary. This executive council received the task to set in motion a certain number of decisions that could favor the inculturation of the Vincentian charism in Africa and collaboration among the Vincentians working there. For that reason, in a letter dated 30 June 1994, this council asked the Visitors, Vice-Visitors and Regional Superiors in Africa and Madagascar:

- a) to think about how to inculturate the Vincentian charism in each province or region and to send the results of that reflection to a commission, composed of Frs. Jean-Baptiste Nsambi-Mbula, François Benolo and Michael Edem, responsible for preparing a synthesis. This document would serve as a base during the next assembly of COVIAM, in June 1996;
- b) to allow the formators to study carefully a particular point of inculturation, namely community life in the African context;
- c) to favor mutual understanding by exchanging news and formators, and by setting common missionary efforts.

This commission on the inculturation of the Vincentian charism in Africa and Madagascar, established during the general assembly of COVIAM in 1994 encountered many difficulties. Nevertheless, it did its work and presented its results during the 1996 assembly. This assembly took place in Rome on 30-31 May. Those who participated in that assembly were: Frs. Victor Bieler, Assistant for the Missions, Thomas Davitt, translator, Luigi Elli, Visitor of Madagascar, Luciano Costa Ferreira, Vice-Visitor of Mozambique, Jan Ermers, Visitor of Ethiopia, Zerajohannes Weldemariam, Vice-Visitor of Eritrea, Yves Danjou, Visitor of Paris (for Cameroon), Chacko Panathara, Superior of Tanzania and Janusz Zwolinski, Visitor of Zaire. Fr. Timothy Njoku, Regional Superior of Nigeria was absent. The Superior General, Robert P. Maloney, also took part in the assembly on the morning of 31 May and gave a conference entitled: “This is the hour of Africa a very important moment in the life of the Church.” In his conference, he sketched three challenges:

- 1) that Africa be fully missionary;
- 2) that our lives be coherent;
- 3) that we give gratuitously.

A greater part of the assembly was focused on reflection about inculturation. After considering different aspects of our vocation and mission, the assembly decided to offer these thoughts to those responsible for the formation in different provinces. The latter would have to think about this as a team and send their suggestions before the end of the year to Fr. Jan Ermers, who, together with the confreres of Ethiopia, was to prepare a program for the meeting of formators in Addis Ababa at the beginning of 1997.

Among other recommendations of the Assembly, we may cite:

- a) the encouragement to continue and develop the exchange of news bulletins;
- b) the invitation to develop an inter-African collaboration like the experience of mutual help among Zaire and Cameroon and Mozambique, or between Cameroon and Madagascar;
- c) the insistence that African Vincentians learn English and French.

Finally, the assembly elected a new executive council: Frs. Janusz Zwolinski, president for a second mandate of three years, Jan Ermers vice-president. The secretary, however, after the modification of Article 7 of the Statutes, would be appointed by the president (Fr. J. Robert Bonenge of Zaire was appointed).

During the General Assembly of 1998 in Rome, the Visitors, Vice-Visitors and Regional Superiors of Africa and Madagascar met several times. Their exchanges essentially focused on the possibility of organizing either an Internal Seminary or an inter-African theologate, according to the propositions of the meeting of formators of Addis Ababa of 1997, without reaching a satisfactory solution. The interested Visitors preferred to move slowly, for the moment did not seem right.

The next meeting of formators would be asked to reflect about a common Internal Seminary program in Africa and Madagascar that each province would follow in its own formation program. Moreover, they were committed to support the partial initiatives taking place (or which might take place) in this domain and intended, for example, to exchange formators and students among the provinces.

Ongoing formation was also taken into consideration. Several confreres desired a structure like CIF, but more modest, for Africa and Madagascar.

The Visitors also discussed their experiences of developing collaboration among provinces. At the same time they wished to see these experiences multiply and intensify. Finally, they reconsidered the executive council of COVIAM, offering the presidency to Fr. Urban Osuji and the vice-presidency to Fr. Girmay Abraha.

During this assembly, we were given the opportunity to try to draw up a balance sheet of the last ten years. If I can give my own point of view, I think that even if the objectives of COVIAM are still far from being reached, we have made some progress. Contacts among the Vincentians of Africa and Madagascar are increasing. Visitors and formators meet regularly and, therefore, we know each other much better than at the beginning of the 1990s. The Province of Congo would propose, during this assembly, other meetings of interest to Vincentians who work with the Vincentian Family. The initiatives of collaboration continue to develop. Some are already being accomplished, others should be established in the near future, and still others are being studied. The more frequent use of Internet and e-mail even in Africa will facilitate, in the days to come, news exchange and will bring us closer to one another. Although the attempts to establish an inter-African theologate or a common Internal Seminary for all the provinces have not been realized, I am convinced that we will not give up. On the contrary, we should go on thinking together. Perhaps we shall set a structure for Vincentian formators like CIF, an idea already suggested during the last General Assembly in 1998, and which our province intends to consider again under the supervision of Visitors, Vice-Visitors and Regional Superiors present here.