

OUR MARTYRS CHALLENGE US

Doing more than just remembering our martyrs on Dehonian Remembrance Day, November 26

Introduction

On November 26, the Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus celebrates the Dehonian memory. This is an incomparable and immeasurable event for the entire congregation, and in a special way for the Congolese Province, an ineffably engraved memory of our martyred confreres, savagely massacred in 1964, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Reliving this memory through various spiritual activities is not only a reason for honor and joy, but also an opportunity for thanksgiving and invocation of our martyred confreres, now our ancestors if we speak in African traditions. It's an expression of the strengthening of faith (*Lk 22:32*). African spirituality, which values a three-dimensional community - *the dead, the living and the not-yet-born* - always in interpersonal relationship, inspires us to take a look at the celebration of our martyrs, the place of worship and the responsibility of the living, without forgetting a brief history.

A brief historical overview

On March 25, 1897, on the feast of the Annunciation, the evangelization of the Falls and Haut-Congo was entrusted to Father Leo John Dehon by Cardinal Ledochowski, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fidei¹. This being the case, two Dehonian missionaries, Fathers Gabriel Grison and Gabriel Lux, were dispatched as pioneers to the unknown missions of *the Independent State of Congo*, now the Democratic Republic of Congo. On December 25, 1897, Father Gabriel Grison celebrated an inaugural mass at the new mission in Stanleyville, now known as Kisangani. This was the Congregation's first successful mission outside Europe after the failure in Ecuador in 1888, and the very first in Africa and Madagascar. From then on, this mission welcomed numerous confreres from all over the world. Three dioceses were founded by the SCJs: the archdiocese of Kisangani, the dioceses of Wamba and Butembo-Beni. Many confreres perished due to disease and bad weather before the event of 1964. In 1960, the country gained independence. However, the first five years of this republic (1960-1965) were characterized by a turbulent climate of struggle for leadership². Rebel groups sprang up in various parts of the country, including the "*Simba or Mulelist Rebellion*", which controlled the eastern part of the country. The cruel consequences of these wars led to the martyrdom of many missionaries, including 28 priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. On the long list of the SCJ missionaries includes Bishop Joseph Wittebols, first bishop of the diocese of Wamba, Father Bernard Longo, missionary in Nduye, and Blessed Sister Marie Clementine Anuarite Nengapeta, a member of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family, a congregation founded at the request of Mgr. Grison in 1930 and its decree of erection was signed by Mgr. Verfaillie on January 2, 1937, before Father J. Haurand, SCJ, gave the name and purpose of the new congregation³. Thereafter, Mgr. Wittebols would be like a father to the young congregation. The tragic circumstances of their deaths and their apostolic zeal rightly deserve commemoration.

¹ Savino Palermo, *Pour l'amour de mon peuple. Chronique et chronologie raisonnées*, Dehoniane Roma, April 1997, p. 1757.

² David Van Reybrouck, *Congo. Une histoire*, Actes du Sud, 2012, p. 305.

³ Savino Palermo, op. cit. p. 1895.

Celebrating our 'ancestors' martyrs

Regularly paying careful homage to our martyrs resonates with an understanding of the African's relationship with the dead. For the African, as Birago Diop says in one of his poems, *the dead are not dead*⁴, and those who have had an exemplary life on earth join the ranks of the ancestors. The latter, i.e. the ancestors, are seen as mediators between God and the living, and their intercession is regularly sought. At this stage, they are precisely comparable to those whom the Church elevates to the ranks of the venerable, blessed and holy. So, it is not surprising to see an African paying careful homage to the dead, attaching importance to a dream in which they come back to him or imploring their intercession. Nor is it mysterious to see an African 'give drink or food to the earth' before drinking or feeding himself, because for him, the ancestors must come first. This is also the logic behind the DRC's Dehonian celebration of November 26. Aware of the sacrifices, sufferings and martyrdoms endured by their confreres, they believe *they have fought the good fight, completed their course and kept the faith* (2 Timothy 4:7), and are worthy of mediation. This is why this commemoration is a propitious opportunity to give thanks, praying for the continuity of the Dehonian mission watered by the blood of our martyrs. Honoring our martyrs is a duty of gratitude for their shed blood, *the seed of Christians*, as Tertullian said, because their witness, fidelity and love for the mission continue to bear fruit in the DRC. Finally, it is a great occasion to solicit their missionary and apostolic zeal for the congregation, and above all to make them a reference of witness of faith for Christians. This begs the question: where do we commemorate them?

Where to commemorate?

Why does the question of place matter to us? Once again invoking African anthropology, respect, seen as consideration, is one of the most dominant values in this culture. Especially, respect for the dead and elders is non-negotiable; it's a requirement and an obvious fact. They must have respect and a place of value. What about our martyrs? Where are their bodies and relics? Where do we celebrate them? Such questions cannot leave a sensitive heart without remorse. For an African, the living are called upon to make the hearts of the ancestors happy. After having given everything: their youth, homelands, right up to the ultimate sacrifice of lives for the honor of the congregation, the Church, and above all for Christ, where are they? Martyrdom is an honor and deserves our gratitude. At Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology in the US Province, there is a corner that I consider sacred where the images of the 28 SCJ martyrs are displayed, surrounded by votive candles, reminding us of the light they gave to the Congregation and the Church. It touches deeply and awakens the mind to action. This is a message and awakens in me the desire that I had while I was still secretary of the Congolese Province: the creation of an appropriate memorial for our martyrs. These martyrs are a richness of the congregation and deserve special attention. Of the 28 martyrs, 10 were killed in Kisangani and thrown into a mass grave with religious sisters, civilians and soldiers.

This is where they still rest to this day. As for those killed in Bafwaswende and Wamba, there is no place to remember these valiant soldiers of Christ, except a cross by the river into which the body of Bishop

⁴ Birago DIOP, *Le souffle des ancêtres* (Recueil leurs et leurs, 1960).

Wittebols had been thrown. The question of a dignified place, a shrine where all the relics, images and stories of the martyred confreres of the congregation in DRC could be gathered, seems therefore an acute one. There is no dignified or honored place for them other than the little shed, on the spot where they were killed, a plot of land bought in 2017, under the administration of Bishop Heiner Wilmer, then Superior General, after his visit to the DRC. I am afraid this unfenced area will become a place where vagrants and the homeless party whenever they can. I hate to think about how people wandering at night disrespect this area. What a disaster to see a place that has seen the blood of our martyrs spilled now being a place of promiscuous and criminal behavior? Our congregation should honor the memory of our martyrs because they are the very seed of the evangelization of this part of Congo, especially for the three dioceses mentioned above. A worthy place for them would be a site for pilgrims, a place to pray through the intercessions of these martyrs, ancestors in the faith. Our martyrs call out to us! They deserve better for this Church, this archdiocese of Kisangani of which they were pioneers, and the congregation. They gave everything. Christians and consecrated persons, daughters and sons of the Church, Dehonian family and Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, let us all open our hearts and be touched by the call of building a nice place, a shrine for their memory. Building a worthy place of worship is our responsibility today.

The responsibility of the living

In the three-dimensional relationship between *the dead, the living and not-yet-born*⁵, theologian Bénézet Bujo believes that the living have a great responsibility to maintain this relationship. The *not-yet-born* are those who are not yet here. Theologian Adalric Jatsa speaks of the active anticipation of the future in the midst of the present⁶. Our role as living beings therefore consists in managing what we have, and above all in preparing a great future to be bequeathed. This permanent concern is the awareness of this sense of communion with the *not-yet-born*, or in Dehonian language, *Sint Unum*. The living also have this same responsibility of communion with the dead, for although gone, the dead continue to be in some sense part of the living. Finally, this communion or "Sint unum" or "synodality" is imposed on Africans, and particularly on us Dehonians. Not surprisingly, unlike many other institutes and congregations, Dehonians devote a daily prayer to their deceased confreres (necrology). Taking care of those who have gone before us is also a plea for recognition of their life witness, so that the Church may inscribe them on the list of Servants, Venerables, Blesseds and Saints. All these steps are possible if the living commit themselves to them. The process of the beatification of Father Bernard Longo should be an open door to consider the other martyrs of 1964. Although he was martyred in Mambasa, his relics are still well preserved in the "Mater Dei" parish church in Nduye, where priests, the faithful and pilgrims have the opportunity to bow as they pass by.

What about the relics of other martyrs such as Bishop Joseph Wittebols and his Companions at the Wamba site, Father Henricus Hams Donatus and his Companions at the Bafwasende site, Father Amour Aubert Jean and his Companions at the Kisangani site? It is also important to collect theirs. Building a shrine for them

⁵ Bénézet Bujo, *Culture africaine et Développement: un dialogue nécessaire*, Finance & Bien commun 2007/3 (N 28-29), Ed. De Boek Supérieur, p. 41-42.

⁶ Adalric Felix Fidèle Jatsa, *The place of the unborn in the African community. Contribution Chrétienne de la personne*, Théologie Africaine Vol.2016.

is a fundamental question requiring an immediate response. This will offer a place for perpetual prayer and adoration. This will be a testimony for the universal church to recognize our martyrs. We, as the living, the Priests of the Sacred Heart, have this responsibility. Our responsibility is to offer them a good place for devotion, to speak of them, to immortalize them in the Church and in society. We have the great responsibility of mobilizing ourselves, our faithful, our friends, our benefactors and all people of good will to build a place worthy of worship. Together let us build a shrine to our confreres, our ancestors in the faith, our martyrs.

Conclusion

The idea of writing about the celebration of November 26, a day dedicated to the memory of our Dehonian martyrs whose significant number shed their blood on Congolese soil in 1964, was born during my years at the provincial secretariat. This desire was renewed when I saw the special place given to the 28 SCJ martyrs of 1964 on display at Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology. Based on African spirituality built around a three-dimensional anthropological relationship, the living are designated as coordinators of this relationship. For this reason, celebrating a martyrs' day is a duty, as they are more highly regarded as ancestors by virtue of having lived exemplary lives; and consequently, their intercession is of inescapable importance. Nevertheless, the consideration reserved for them also depends on the care given to the place of celebration. In this respect, our martyrs call out to us, for they seem abandoned by the living. They need a place worthy of worship or reverence. This challenge must awaken our conscience and responsibility as a Church and Congregation. It is our duty to make them known as worthy sons of the Church, as in the case of Father Bernard Longo whose beatification process is underway, because they deserve it. This reflection is an appeal on behalf of our martyrs of 1964 in the DRC, and an exhortation to all of us, as a congregation, to build a shrine to our martyrs where Christians and pilgrims alike will find a place of spiritual renewal and perpetual adoration.

-Fr. Floribert Bulu Dhelo, SCJ