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Religious dreams in Africa face stark realities

by Thomas C. Fox



Vincentian Father Emmanuel Typpamm addresses assembly (Photos by Tom Fox)

KAMPALA, UGANDA -- As a gathering of Catholic religious leaders began its first full day of deliberations here they found themselves caught between their dreams and harsh realities that could very well overwhelm those dreams.

Hope and good intentions run up against quite modest resources in Africa.

The meeting of some 60 men and women religious from many parts of Africa is taking place at the Saint Augustine Institute on the outskirts of this traffic-jammed capital city. The institute, a compound where bishops meet and priests come for retreats and rest, sits behind walls along a small dusty dirt road that is so bumpy riding a bicycle on it is virtually impossible. Cars and carts move slowly.

The rooms here are sparse and clean and electricity in the compound, like elsewhere in African, cuts on and off without notice.

This is only the second time in its history that the Confederation of Conferences of Major Superiors of Africa and Madagascar, or simply, COMSAM, is meeting. The organization, like the Catholic church here, is still quite young, and is working as much to set up viable structures as to set a mission course.



And COMSAM faces considerable obstacles.

For example, in the last three years its president was appointed a bishop and left the group. It had an office but was asked to leave as the room was needed for other purposes. COMSAM, even today, is looking for a host country and host room it can afford with its modest budget. Local conference delegates, as a sign of support, were asked to each contribute \$10.

On the first work day here, following a weekend of rich liturgical ceremonies and lengthy speeches, following rites punctuated with lively rhythmic music and high masses, the gathered religious delegates sat down around six tables to discuss where their organization had come from and where it might go.

Led by a three member by executive team and outside facilitators, including missionaries and Conrad Hilton Foundation board member, Presentation Sister of the Blessed Virgin Mary Joyce Meyer, the group listened to some frank and, at times, discouraging assessments.

It seems some of the practical challenges these dedicated religious face are so large and varied they were drawn to wonder at times if their organization has any reasonable chance of moving forward.

Twenty-one conferences of major superiors, some men, some women, some representing both, have come here. There are at least twice as many throughout Catholic Africa, but a host of obstacles have kept them away.

Among the obstacles facing COMSAM are these: the cost of transportation, turnover in religious leadership positions within orders, language barriers (this meeting is being conducted in French and English with simultaneous translations, when the electricity works), limited organizational skills, political and social turmoil in many nations, and a pervasive lack of financial resources.

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COMSAM is a novice organization. It began in 2005 and held its first general assembly in 2009. This is its second. Less than a handful of delegates who attended the first are here at the second. Collective memory is part of the challenge.

The first assembly had as its theme, "Passion for Christ, Passion for Africa"; this assembly, echoing themes from the Synod on Africa, which took place in Rome in 2009, has chosen, "Witnesses to the truth

at the service of Communion and Reconciliation in Africa.? Three words are key ? and come out statements by Pope Benedict XVI and the synod: Truth, communion and reconciliation.

All three will be required for COMSAM to succeed as it wishes.

The church has experienced remarkable growth in the past 100 years in Africa, vocations have been abundant. However, it now faces growing pains, serious religious formation issues and developing leadership skills among overworked religious who carry enormous responsibilities.

Many COMSAM delegates face challenging local hostilities, social, religious and, at times, political, in nature. It goes without saying being in communion with one another, and their bishops, will be essential for growth, if not for survival itself.

COMSAM was formed as a vehicle for religious congregations to share common concerns and speak with a common voice. Members recognize the enormous power of a pan African Catholic voice, one that works with and can articulate the trials and hopes of the Catholic faithful, one that can boldly speak on behalf of the gospels and against the violence, corruption and human rights abuses that are sadly prevalent here.



The COMSAM executive committee, made up of

articulated COMSAM's mission and history during the first day of meetings. They described the work they had done since the last gathering. Much of their work has dealt with finding practical ways to set up an organization that can meet such lofty goals.

Some delegates used the word "dream" as they spoke of their group's future. It seemed to capture the spirit of the distance they need to travel and the determination they have to make the trip.

At one point Meyer, the former director of the Conrad Hilton Foundation Fund for Sisters, which has provided support to African women religious for more than a decade, offered personal encouragement to the delegates, saying that if their plans grew and became solid, if their mission took hold, financial resources would follow.

"Resources can come if a plan is in place," she said. European funding for the African missions has been a source of strength for years, but Western missionaries have been leaving, as numbers dwindle, placing more leadership and financial pressures on the Africans.

A religious brother at one point spoke passionately about his dream of overcoming the obstacles COMSAM faces. Speaking about the need to speak in one voice he said: "We can be an example to Africa."

The first day of meetings followed an evening of rich African dance and music. A dance group, made up largely of orphans and founded by a Jesuit as a counter sign to the Rwandan massacres, entertained the delegates, highlighting the many varied cultures in the region. Before the evening had ended most of the delegates were dancing and singing along side the entertainers. The local churches here lack neither rich



cultures nor lively spirit.

The deliberations at the institute also followed a weekend of liturgies and encouragement from bishops, including two high masses concelebrated by the visiting prefect of the Congregation of Institutes of Consecrated life and Societies of Apostolic life, Archbishop Joao Braz de Aviz.

The retired Archbishop of Kampala, Cardinal Emmanuel Wamala, was present for one and addressed the delegates during a homily at a Sunday mass in the cathedral here. He encouraged them to represent the marginalized of the continent.

“Many, if not most of your religious congregations were born in that spirit of Christ: concern for the poor, for the weak, for the marginalized, for the oppressed,” the elderly 85-year-old cardinal said.

“They were born to fight evil in whatever color or form it manifests itself. It was a concern for justice, for love, for peace, for a reconciled humanity.”

In a similar vein, Aviz, a Brazilian making his first trip to Africa, said that vocations in Africa are most encouraging. He told the delegates at a mass at the shrine of the 19th century Ugandan martyrs that Pope Benedict personally wanted to show support for their work.

Aviz, who was here for two days, said he would return to Rome “a happy man,” pleased by the dedication and hospitality he had found here.

A representative of the Symposium of the Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), the umbrella body for the African bishops, was also on hand at the gathering and some of the early conversations focused on how the bishops and religious could better coordinate their efforts.

Fox is NCR publisher.

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