

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

February 13, 2012 at 9:20am

African religious to voice peoples' concerns

by Thomas C. Fox



COMSAM President Sacred Heart Sr. Marie Therese Diene (Photo by Tom Fox)

KAMPALA, UGANDA -- If Marie Therese Diene has her way the Catholic Church in Africa is going to have a much more public voice. A Daughter of the Sacred Heart sister from Senegal, she wants that voice to come out of the religious communities of Africa and to represent both the suffering and hopes of the peoples on the continent.

Diene wears the all white habit of her community and, doing so, stands out in any gathering. It's not easy to miss her when she enters a room for several reasons. She is a religious and a woman of considerable energy and passion. During a weeklong gathering of men and women religious leaders here from throughout Africa she stood out and emerged as their newly elected president.

She has a youthful presence and speaks her convictions with clarity and confidence. Now she has a new platform to share those convictions. For the next three years she will be leader and most visible voice of the Confederation of Conferences of Major Superiors of Africa and Madagascar, or in the English



COMSAM was formed in 2005 by men and women religious leaders in Africa to share common challenges and speak out on peace and justice issues with a single voice. Before some of Africa's most prominent religious leaders came here Feb. 4 for a week of meetings they had only met once before in general assembly, in 2009. This is a young organization in a relatively young church.

Diene speaks English, but prefers to speak in French, the official language of her native country, Senegal, the Western most nation in Africa. Shortly into an interview in English after her election she asked to continue in French, and then quickly went on to do so.

"You in the media, above all, know about the wars and rancor in Africa today," she said to me, her eyes gazing into mine. "We consecrated religious must dedicate ourselves to reconciliation. We must become instruments and witnesses and apostles for reconciliation. We must be the voices of our people."

The theme of reconciliation on the continent of Africa surfaced prominently during the Synod of Bishops on Africa in 2009. There is all too visible division in Africa, having led to violence and warfare. Nations such as Syria, Egypt, Sudan and South Sudan are only a few that quickly come to mind.

As 57 delegate leaders of men and women national religious conferences shared their experiences it became clear they felt an urgent need to address these divisions. During the course of a week they planned strategies to better address the issue of division and reconciliation.

But they face severe challenges, including a lack of financial resources.

An example: COMSAM's secretariat works out of a temporarily borrowed office within a religious congregation in Cameroon. It will soon need to find another location. COMSAM's secretariat has a budget of less than \$25,000 a year. To help support it, each of the estimated 850 men and women religious congregations across Africa are asked to send in \$10 annually. Some can send in more; some find the allowance one more responsibility in a long list of responsibilities.

There is little doubt that COMSAM religious leaders want to move forward to face their challenges. There is also little doubt they want to speak in a united way. The question that arose during the conference was how to make that possible.

It had been arduous week for the group. They worked from dawn to dusk listening to reports. Conference leaders spoke about successes and "shadows." Among the later were formation issues that come from fast growth and pressures being placed on Catholics in Muslim areas of Africa.

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The group formed a theological task force to consider the reports and to offer its daily interpretations. It increasingly searched to find answers to religious life and wider social issues. Short of finding answers, it looked for means to continue to examine the question collectively.

The continent of Africa being as large as it is, the COMSAM religious decided it needed to bolster regional headquarters to better address regional concerns. It also reaffirmed a peace and justice platform.

Nothing came easy. At one level, just getting together was an achievement. To find the means to gather required outside help. The White Fathers, the Porticus Foundation and the Conrad Hilton Foundation all contributed to make this second general assembly possible. The Saint Augustine Institute, a retreat center for priests and the meeting grounds for the bishops of Uganda, offered free use of its facilities. The conference took place in English and French; simultaneous translation was necessary.



At another level, the gathered religious went beyond their

expectations, seeming to draw on the energy of the group as the meeting went forward.

One of the biggest catalysts for action was a widespread recognition that somehow the Spirit was calling COMSAM and the group had to answer that call. Another was the awareness that new tools for communication were advancing and distant delegates could communicate as never before.

The internet is spreading in Africa unevenly. Many religious work in rural areas where there is little or no internet access.

Many of the religious who gathered for the COMSAM assembly are the children and grandchildren of Catholic converts. As second and third generation Catholics they seem to combine strong faith and a desire to make a larger mark on African society.

Doing so is a COMSAM aim. Despite the strong will, the task will not be easy.

The more educated religious here are overworked and being pulled in many directions; most wear more than one hat. As important as COMSAM's mission might be to the delegates that came here, that mission is just one more on a long list of other missions they carry.

Religious life in African is in the process of transformation. For most of the past century international religious orders set directions and maintained church structures. But now with vocations in sharp decline in the West, many international congregations are pulling back or out completely leaving it up to African religious to carry on. This has added to already existing pressures the local religious have to live with.

On the final day of the meeting, with the assistance of facilitators, including Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary Sr. Joyce Meyer who has many years of experience in Africa, the delegates were pressed to finish their ambitious agenda. They debated technical points as they revised the COMSAM charter. They

elected new national and regional officers. They passed action resolutions. They approved a conference statement to share with the outside world.

“We leave the assembly of CONSAM,” the delegates wrote, “22 countries of Africa committed to living our lives in truth and integrity. Although we face many challenges of disparities between countries, institutions and families in this great continent, we are committed to finding ways to bring about communion, through collaboration for justice and peace.”

As the hours ticked away, the religious were acutely aware time was running out. They did not want to lose a minute as they searched to assure themselves their newly rekindled spirit of common purpose would not diminish after departures.

A few sheepishly admitted they had not been adequate communicators and pledged to do better. Some explained the difficulties of responding to emails on the sole congregation computer.

With an eye to the future, they approved four resolutions:

- To establish a theological committee to address pressing issues of spirituality and religious life;
- To make itself better known by establishing a network of regional conferences;
- To strengthen its reach and impact by having each men’s and women’s conference form communications units, and;
- To establish systems in each conference to deal the particular justice and peace issues of that conference area.

Delegates left the Saint Augustine Institute after a final Mass and outdoor garden meal saying they felt, despite obstacles, on a fresh track. With hugs and optimism they left determined to carry their work forward -- and make a mark on the continent.

[Tom Fox is *NCR* publisher.]

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