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**FROM GRAND BIGARD
AND BOKRIYC (BELGIUM)
TO THE REGIONAL NOVITIATE
OF KINSHASA.
THE LASALLIAN VOCATION
IN AFRICA**

While a number of Districts in Europe and North America are alarmed, and with good reason, at seeing their houses of formation emptying and closing down, in Africa and Latin America, it is quite the opposite which is a potential source of worry: the number of candidates for religious life and the priesthood is very impressive.

Likewise, according to the most reliable forecasts, in two generations at the most, the African Churches will have the greatest number of faithful in the world after Latin America. It can be thought, then, that the future of the Catholic Church no longer depends on the west.

From now onwards, how could it be possible not to take these facts into account and to see the resulting changes?

As for us, involved as we are in this phenomenon in the Church, we wish to make our contribution by reflecting a little on the position of the Lasallian vocation in Africa. Such reflection must include an analysis of the determining factors, conditions and requirements of initial formation.

To begin with, we should perhaps recall the main stages of the Brothers' settlement in Africa, and in particular, in Zaire, "the most vigorous Christian community in Africa" (MISSI, February 1989).

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1. Beginnings.

On October 7th 1909, five Belgian Brothers of the Christian Schools arrived in Boma (Zaire), coming from Belgium at the express wish of King Leopold II.

That year marked the beginning of the missionary activities of the Brothers in Zaire. The Brothers settled in and gradually spread their apostolic activities to Boma (1909), Kinshasa (1910), Tumba (1921), Bama-nya (1929), Mbandaka (1930), Kangu (1930), Gombe Matadi (1936), Matadi (1938). This expansion ended with the outbreak of the Second World War.

As soon as the war ended in 1945, the District received reinforcements: 14 Brothers arrived from Belgium, and new houses were opened in Itipo (1949), Bikoro (1953), Konzo (1953), Kilwa (1956), Lubumbashi (1964), Gbadolite (1969) and Mbanza Ngungu (1972).

In 1953, the Brothers went to Rwanda, opening houses in Byumba (1953), Nyuondo (1955), Ruhengeri (1957), Shungungu (1963) and Butare (1968).

This long chronological list of school foundations gives no idea of the efforts involved. To do this one would have to describe how these establishments grew and flourished. Wherever the Brothers settled, they set up schools which provided education at a variety of levels from primary to university.

At secondary school level in particular, the Brothers prepared students for a career in administration, crafts, teaching, professions, commerce and other specialised areas.

It is worth pointing out also that in Boma the Brothers were for a time involved in paramilitary training; and in Kinshasa, they were instrumental in setting up a school of river navigation.

This apostolic expansion came to an end in 1974, when the State nationalised the schools, and the number of Brothers was cut down, with 24 Belgian missionary Brothers returning to Belgium for good.

As the result of an educational agreement signed by the State of Zaire and the Churches on February 26th 1977, the Brothers agreed to take over the administration of some of their former schools in Kinshasa (7 schools), Matadi (2), Tumba (3) and Mbandaka (3).

2. Recruitment and formation of Zairean candidates.

a/ From 1920 to 1972.

In 1920, the De La Salle Brothers were the first religious in Zaire to be able to integrate completely indigenous vocations in their congregation.

This generous and far-sighted step was very daring, when one recalls the socio-political situation of the time.

In that year, two young Congolese were sent to Belgium to make their novitiate at Grand Bigard. A third one followed later and made his novitiate in 1928 at Bokriyck.

As for Zaire, Brother Veron Ignace, the Visitor and a Belgian, opened the first house of formation in the educational establishment in Boma. There followed the opening in Tumba of a juniorate (1928), novitiate (1929) and a scholasticate (1930).

In 1932, the novitiate was transferred to Bamanya (Equatorial Region) and stayed there till 1954. After that it moved to Gombe Matadi (Lower Zaire Region), where it stayed till 1966.

The novitiate remained closed for two years (1967/68) and then re-opened in October 1969, still at Gombe Matadi. It closed again in 1972 and remained so till 1977. From that year onwards, the work of recruitment has continued uninterrupted.

From 1930 onwards, the Brothers had no difficulty in attracting indigenous vocations, but the peak was reached in 1958/59.

There were at that time 60 black Brothers in community and 30 novices in formation.

b/ The increase in the number of vocations in the last ten years.

On September 1st 1977, 8 youngsters who wanted to become Brothers joined the Brother Veron Ignace Postulancy in Kinshasa. On September 16th 1978, 4 young Zaireans (out of the 8) took the habit of the Brothers at a prayerful eucharistic celebration.

This was a memorable and blessed day after so many years, and in many it reawakened hope for the future.

In 1978, in a third move, the novitiate came to Kinshasa. At the same time, the juniorate and the scholasticate were transferred there also. They are now called the "Brother Veron Ignace Postulancy" and the "Mary Immaculate Scholasticate".

In 1983, there were some internal changes in the novitiate: it became pan-African first, and then was extended from one to two years.

For this canonical year, 1988/89, our numbers in the novitiate are as follows: from Cameroun (1), Ivory Coast (1), Equatorial Guinea (1), Nigeria (3), Rwanda (5), Togo (3), Zaire (10).

c/ Changes in numbers of novices since 1920.

Year	Number of novices
1920-1929	9
1930-1939	27
1940-1949	43
1950-1959	72
1960-1969	27
1970-1979	12
1980-1989	38
Total	228

As the figures show, numbers rose steadily from the beginning of recruitment and reached a peak in 1959.

The ten years from 1960 to 1970 were disastrous: 60 Brothers left during this period at a rate of 6 per year.

From 1970 to 1979, 12 joined but 22 left. The upward trend begun in 1980 gives us all hope, but Brothers continue to leave and slow down the upward trend.

It cannot be said too often: statistics are dangerous. The most critical say they are dangerously misleading, especially since we are dealing with an area which depends first and foremost on the free gift of God's love and not on human calculation.

All the same, these figures are enlightening and can (and ought to) make us think.

This is all the more true when one realises that the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is one of the few international congregations whose apostolic experience now exceeds 300 years, 80 of which in Zaire.

That is why we think that the time has come for a common effort to improve, with God's help, our system of formation.

And so it is a source of great joy to see the administrative centre of the Institute and the various sectors in Africa giving priority to the fostering of vocations. The effort made in this area over the past 10 or so years, both financially as well as with regard to personnel, is quite considerable. It is already noticeably bearing fruit, although in some sectors results have not yet come up to expectations.

Brother Kulwikila Mbala