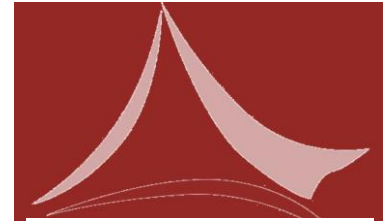


MISSIONARY CONGRESS (Johannesburg, 25th – 26th October 2014)

On Saturday and Sunday, from 9am to 4pm, around 250 people came from fifty (50) different parishes (out of 120 parishes in the whole archdiocese). Not bad, for a first time! But we got the quality, if not the expected quantity: we had aimed at five delegates from each parish, which would have amounted to 600! The M.Afr who took part were Jan DeGroef (Bishop), Didier Michon, Christophe Boyer, Martin Somda (stagiaire), Seán O’Leary and Michel Meunier.



The Logo of the Congress:
"Enlarge the Space of Your Tent"

The AIMS of the Congress were:

- ❖ to explore ways for us, the Church, to fulfil our vocation of proclaiming the Gospel / Mission
- ❖ to move from maintenance to being on mission (enlarge our tent)
- ❖ to celebrate our baptismal call together
- ❖ to take back to our parishes the motivation to move forward on mission

The First Day

Archbishop Buti Tlhagale wished to welcome all by sending his VG, Fr. Duncan Tsoke. Fr. Duncan referred to the goals of the congress especially by referring to Pope Francis’s quotation, *“I dream of a missionary church”*.

The pastoral programme *RENEW* of the SACBC (Southern Africa Catholic Bishops’ Conference), phase 3, states that *“To belong to Christ means to be committed to mission”* (sub-theme of the Congress), and to open up to other cultures and other peoples.

The key-note speaker was Archbishop William Slattery, OFM, of Pretoria Archdiocese. He based his talk on the theme of the congress, taken from **Isaiah 54:2 - “Enlarge the space of your tent” - Belonging to Christ, committed for mission**. He congratulated those who had prepared the congress for the awareness they had evidenced to respond to the call to mission. He quoted a lot from *“The Joy of the Gospel”*, *“The Church in Africa”* and *Scripture*. His very lively opening speech really threw a challenge to all the participants to become more missionary-minded. His words came from his experience of being a missionary in Malawi and South Africa.

The first day went very well, with five different talks by Priests and Sisters, followed by group sharing and report back. The topics were: ***“A new chapter of evangelization” (Evangelii Gaudium, 1); “Encounter with an event, a Person which gives a new horizon and a decisive direction” (EG 7); “Goodness always tends to spread” (EG 9); “A conversion which will restore the joy of faith to our hearts and inspire a commitment to the Gospel” (EG 15) “From a pastoral ministry of mere conservatism to a decidedly missionary pastoral ministry” (EG 15)***. All these topics were very well delivered and the discussions that followed were lively. Here are some of the elements which came out of the group discussions:

Some Responses:

- In spite of sodalities and organizations in parishes, there are people who are still hurting badly and quietly. There are not enough real “apostles” doing anything about it – not caring for people in their trouble.
- There has been mention of ‘structures of the Church’, ‘evangelization’ and ‘being proud of being a Catholic’.
- In many parishes, a parish project takes over from evangelization. “Even in sodalities, evangelization is absent”, and the focus is on other things such as administration and buildings.
- “You can’t give what you don’t have”. A family may have a Catholic parent, but he/she does not practise. There is ‘superficial love’. It is not genuine because people do not know the hurts. “The Church should be a community of belonging and warmth. People are so busy. They attend Mass and kneel next to people on the pews, but there isn’t a sense of welcome”

- The question was asked from the floor: **How was the Missionary Congress promoted and advertised in the Diocese? Many parishioners heard nothing about it in their parishes!**
- One view was expressed that before evangelization could take place and enlarging the space of one's tent, hurting families, spouses and children needed to be supported and helped. Such things as peace, love unity, care, compassion, forgiveness, respect, generosity, encouragement and intimacy needed to be established in the family before evangelization could take place.
- **On the subject of youth:**
 - There are young people with a strong desire to do something beautiful for God, but "when they open their mouths" [to say anything] it is immediately assumed that they want to become priests or Sisters. The implication is that the role of lay people's contribution to the parish or the Church is not taken seriously or appreciated.
 - Students at university are met with challenges such as many religions and Satanists. "What is happening to university chaplains?"
 - There is nothing for the youth in the church. They need to be given more Involvement, e.g. in the liturgy, in witnessing and evangelizing in their own parish, work place, prisons and hospitals. "Introduce different groups in the church, e.g. prayer groups, Couples for Christ, Youth for Christ".

The Second Day

Sunday, some of the same people came back and some new ones as well. But the number was reduced to around two hundred...

This day again was very interesting because the talks were more under the form of testimonies.

"The History of the Diocese of Johannesburg" (given by an "old timer" missionary); ***"Immigrants and Refugees in South Africa"*** (by a Scalabrini Sister working with refugees); ***"Orphans, HIV/AIDS"*** (by a consecrated lay woman who founded a Home for Destitute and Abandoned Children); ***"Couples for Christ / Youth for Christ"*** (by a young man who, from television actor, became a youth apostle, after a deep personal conversion); ***"History – Sudan-South Sudan"*** (by our confrere Seán O'Leary). From this last talk, we presented a project for South Sudan: to send money to the hospital of Mapuordit, run by the Comboni Missionaries. (At the end of the day, donations were received for the project). There was also a talk by the new National Director of the PMS (Pontifical Mission Societies).

The participants then met in their respective Parish Groups in order to write down and present some concrete proposals they want to implement in their own milieu in order to create a better missionary spirit among all the parishioners. Here are only a few of the many projects which were written down.

- **Existing prayer group/ initiate mission prayer group in parish.**
- **Introduce vocation/mission cross into the parish – one home/family or individual to accept the cross for a week. For the relevant week the family/individual are to pray and /or fast for the intentions of the Congress.**
- **"Refresher" conference for all participants every year during mission month.**
- **Get one of the missionary priests/sisters to give a talk promoting the mission at the Sunday Masses.**
- **To form a group of Evangelizers to help us organise a parish Workshop to promote Missionary vocations.**
- **Use St. Vincent de Paul, which already exists, to assist the needy, by adding Evangelising.**
- **Invite people to a meeting for those interested in responding to Mission.**
- **Make ourselves available to share in small groups.**
- **Mention support of hospital in Southern Sudan.**

On November 17th, we had our evaluation and planning meeting. Here are a few points from that meeting.

- We agreed that there were too many talks and that next time we should remove one or two, so as to give more time for group sharing.
- We plan to visit the parishes which sent delegates and do some follow-up with them. Not only priests and religious, but also lay people – who gave testimonies - should visit them.
- At the next Clergy Meeting of the Archdiocese, we will ask for a slot of time to explain what happened and what are the plans for the future?
- For next year, we should have more testimonies by actual missionaries “ad extra”, and if possible by one South African - though they are very rare!
- Maybe the beginning of October would be better than the end of the month, for 2 reasons:
 1. More students would be able to come (less exam pressure);
 2. We could entrust the participants with organising Mission Sunday (3rd Sunday of October) in their respective parishes.

At 2:30 pm, we had the closing Mass with Bishop Jan DeGroef, M.Afr. – in charge of the department of Evangelisation of the SACBC) and Bishop Joseph Sandri (Comboni) of Witbank Diocese. The celebration was lively and meaningful. Some symbols were brought up at the offertory to express the different tasks and ways of being missionaries: the lit candle, the bible, a tent, a globe and then the bread and the wine.

On the whole, we are very pleased with the outcome. Some Parish Priests still have to be pulled out of their slumber and open their minds and hearts to the missionary dimension of the Church. If they do, more lay people will participate and help their parishes to grow in the spirit of the new evangelisation.

Michel Meunier, M.Afr. (November 2014)