

**Darlene's Visit
to
The Democratic Republic
of the
Congo**

August 2009



The Beginning...

Short summary of NDS history in Zaire/Democratic Republic of the Congo

- In 1990, NDS was invited to the Diocese of Kisantu, Zaire. In August-September 1990, Anne Catherine Avril NDS and Pierre Lenhardt NDS went for the first time to give sessions on *Jewish Liturgy and the New Testament*. Louise Marie Niesz NDS accompanied them for two weeks on this first contact with the country. (Reports of all three make very good reading! They are in French and can be obtained from sionsec@tin.it).
- In August 1991, Louise Marie NDS, Ada lanes NDS and Yvonne Schneider, Associate, went to Kisantu for a second session. Soon after their departure the country was again in conflict and no further sessions take place.
- Victorine Mbuyamba, Congolese, from the European Province, makes final vows in April, 2004.



- In July 2008, Yvonne Schneider accompanies Victorine to Kananga (her home diocese) where they organize a session for lay persons of the diocese. The topic of Yvonne's session was *Discovering the Jewish Humanity of Jesus in Order to Better Understand our Christian Faith*. Before joining Victorine in Kananga, Yvonne gives the same session in the Kisantu diocese where she had been 17 years earlier.
- The General Leadership Team decides that Darlene will accompany Victorine and Yvonne for their session of August, 2009 in Kananga. Yvonne gives a session on *the Our Father* and Victorine on *Jubilee*. The event coincides with the 50th Jubilee of the Diocese. Again, Yvonne goes first to Kisantu to continue her teaching with religious, priests and laity in the diocese.
The purpose of Darlene's visit: to begin to look at the question "What possible future links with Africa can there be for Sion?"



Arrival

Victorine and I both arrived in Kinshasa on August 4th, with Yvonne joining us from Kisantu the following morning for our flight to Kananga.

We stayed with the Sisters of La Coeur Immaculée de Marie (CIM), who live on a diocesan property that was formerly the residence of the Bishop.



Sr. Florence, Victorine, Darlene, Victorine's two sisters, Antoinette who lives in Kananga, and Bertine who lives in Bergamo, Italy.



Yvonne Schneider (who took all these photos), Victorine and Sr. Beatrice who is now in Evry, France with three other sisters of CIM.



Biblical Sessions

In 2007 Victorine did some biblical sessions with lay persons involved in school and parish ministries. A group called “The Fraternity of Notre Dame de Sion” developed as a result. Yvonne Schneider, a retired paediatrician, associate of Sion and lecturer at Sidic Paris went to Kananga with Victorine in 2008 to do a biblical session. This year her session was on the *Our Father* in reference to the Jewish background and sources of this Christian prayer. Yvonne was involved 20 years ago when the European and Mediterranean provinces made a commitment to the Kisantu diocese. Unfortunately, they went only two years before the political situation made it impossible for them to return. For the past two years, Yvonne has renewed those ties and done biblical sessions in the Kisantu diocese before coming to Kananga.

*One of the groups
working on questions*



Because of the Golden Jubilee year of the diocese, Victorine also did some teaching on the biblical jubilee year and its implications for today. Each day during the session she presented certain aspects of the jubilee year from Leviticus 25, drawing from the participants how this concept challenges them in their lives.

The fact that Victorine is from this region and therefore speaks Tshiluba (I have just checked with Google how to spell this word and discovered that there are 242 languages or dialects spoken in Congo!), gave this hour of the daily timetable an added dynamism. Some very challenging discussion emerged touching on slavery/liberation of captives, idolatry, environmental issues arising from the Shabbat/rest of the land, the role of leadership – in the milieu of these lay people in the DR Congo today.



Eucharistic celebration at the end of the 2008 summer session

Diocesan Jubilee

The first Sunday after we arrived was the Diocesan Celebration of first and final vows of all religious congregations as well as the 25th, 40th and 50th jubilees of religious profession. This celebration was part of the program for the 50th anniversary of the diocese.



Sisters in Congolese and European habits



Sisters of CIM around their superior pronouncing their final vows

Can you see the boys with the “best seats” - in the tree?



An elderly cloistered Carmelite



Several days after this celebration Sr. Cecile, silver jubilarian, had a reception for friends and relatives where we were living. At one stage, someone approached her with a gift and soon there was a line of people coming towards her with their gifts. Then I heard drums and saw several older women “moving” towards Cecile in a slow dance. Cecile immediately left her place and entered into the dance moving towards them.



Sr. Cecile and her mother

One of them was Cecile’s elderly mother, wearing a gorgeous mauve outfit, the traditional “pagne” skirt and a large long top with a scarf of the same fabric tied around her head, making an extravagant and beautiful picture. She was carrying a live chicken in her hand, which I was told is traditional for a mother to present to her daughter on her wedding day.





Soon many other women had joined in the dance, including Yvonne and myself ,who were pulled in.

Cecile, silver jubilarian and her mother with the microphone singing/chanting a “genealogy”



Another woman continuing; Cecile’s mother in mauve





Darlène, Victorine and her mother

Victorine's mother, her cousin Sr. Cecile, niece Vicky, and father



The Congolese Habit

Most religious sisters belong to diocesan congregations, which were founded after the Belgians left the country in 1960. The majority of sisters in the Congo wear a local “habit” which is inculturated, practical and attractive. At some stage according to what I was able to pick up, the conference of bishops felt that sisters should wear local habits rather than the imported European versions.



Sister in Congolese habit

A model was chosen which includes a “pagne” (the gn pronounced like the Spanish ñ), which is the typically worn long skirt that is a straight piece of cloth wrapped around the body with the ends tied tightly at the waist.

The top is made from the same fabric, has an open neck, fairly fitted with either a front or back closing, and puffed sleeves that go down just below the elbow. The sisters wear a scarf over their hair that is more or less of the same colors. The beautiful women look fantastic in this “habit”, the less beautiful look really good. The community of the Sisters of CIM (Coeur Immaculée de Marie), with whom we stayed, also have a white and a gray habit for “occasions”. The fabric of the Congolese habit is cotton, very African in design and often very colourful. In some congregations the fabric/color of the habit is each sister’s choice but always the same style. Each congregation is identified by its cross. The CIM sisters have a variety of habits, but wear the same fabric on specific days – apparently this was to correct some abuses of sisters having too many outfits or colors that were a bit too elaborate!



Among the fabrics often worn by either women or men are “memorial” designs, meant to commemorate an event, a jubilee, etc. They sometimes have the photo of a person being celebrated or information about the event, significant dates, etc.

For example one of Sr. Astrid’s outfits had a large photo of the Archbishop on her bosom and another on her “derrière”, which commemorated his installation as Bishop! So as you may already have guessed, for the golden jubilee of the diocese a cloth was printed with the names of all the parishes, important dates, etc.



Srs Clementine, who is finishing a sewing diploma; Cecile, a nurse and anesthetist; and Florence, who has just completed a sewing diploma.

Note a man’s bearded face on Cecile’s sleeve at the bottom right-hand corner!





At the party the NDS delegation in their new outfits with Mgr Marcel

A few days before my departure I learned that the Archbishop had offered each of the three of us some of this fabric for an outfit to be made by Sr. Clementine, one of the delightful young sisters with whom we lived. When I was measured for my outfit I asked if she would make it in the style of the Congolese habit, instead of a suit type.

Victorine was delighted and decided to have hers made in the same style. Clementine was pleased also – she has made so many of this style that she could probably design and sew it up in her sleep!

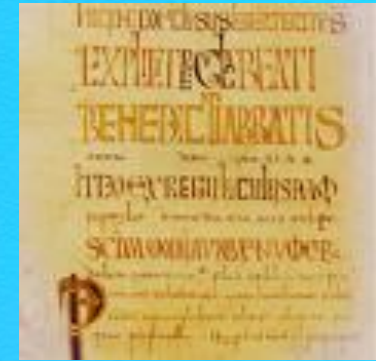
Yvonne's outfit was a simple skirt and top.

In any case the outfits were made in a day and so we wore them for the big party at the Archbishop's!



The Benedictines Have Come to the Diocese!

While we were in Kananga we were privileged to be present for the opening of a Benedictine monastery of women in the diocese. It's the story of an incredibly creative journey that has been the result of a collaborative effort that is truly ecclesial. I'm not sure I have all the history correct, but what I was able to piece together is the following.



Regula Benedicti

Somehow because of the presence of a priest from the diocese of Kananga in Florence, Italy, a contact was made between a monastery of enclosed Benedictine sisters (the youngest of whose last three “standing” members is 73) and the diocese of Kananga.

Two young Congolese women who wished to become Benedictines were sent to Florence for their formation – which is normally not allowed by the Bishops’ Conference.



One of them, Sr. Cecile has now returned for the opening of the monastery, having just made her final vows in May. A second will be making her final vows in October and then joining the group.

In the meantime during the last year a team of three Congolese sisters of three different congregations have been working with several young women to help them discern their vocations to Benedictine contemplative life. Five will now begin their postulancy with Sr. Cecile. Several others have come to begin as aspirants. Two Italian sisters from the monastery in Florence (remember, the youngest is 73!) had come for the event.



Sr. Cecile, Benedictine

The Archbishop indicated that one of the three sisters who had helped to form the young women over this last year would probably be staying on for a while to help Sr. Cecile with formation - a daunting task for a young woman who has just made final vows! At the end of the Eucharist for the opening, Sr. Cecile spoke describing the Benedictine charism and thanking all those who were involved in making this foundation a reality over these years. She said at the end of her talk that monastic life is said to have saved Europe and perhaps monastic life can save Africa.



The monastery outside of Kananga was built some 10 years ago for a new community of Benedictine monks, but the foundation was seemingly a bit chaotic and the place was soon abandoned. The Archbishop offered the property to the new community and part of the building is now being finished for living quarters and chapel. The CIM sister accompanying the young is also gifted in gardening which was obvious on the property: corn, manioc, pineapple, banana trees, vegetables... On that note, the seminary for philosophy students, which we visited has an obligatory three mornings a week in the fields – to help the seminary to become self reliant as well as to teach the seminarians something that could help them in the future. The priest who is bursar of the seminary is also an agronomist!

Aspirants, postulants with the choir



Bringing Gifts to the Sound of Music and Dancing!

One afternoon Cecile came to my room to tell me that Victorine's family was there and wanted to see me. When I came out I was met by a procession of gifts: singing, dancing, and clapping (I don't remember if there was a drum). It was Victorine's mother, her two sisters, two nieces and two other women bringing gifts "for me": a basket with pineapples, plantains, a jug of oil and a bleating goat!



The younger daughter in a very popular hairdo, especially for children



Procession of gifts (notice my goat!): Victorine's mother, Sr. Clementine, Victorine's sister Antoinette and daughter, with yournger daughter in the photo on the left. The skirt I am wearing was a "donation" because I had arrived in the Congo without my luggage. The fabric was a piece that Victorine got in Ghana which Sr. Clementine transformed into this one piece skirt.





Providing water for our rooms

When I asked Victorine what this was about she said that because the family was unable to invite me for a meal they brought me the makings of a meal instead!

When the Belgians left the country a fairly decent infrastructure was in place. Victorine says that when she was a student in Kinshasa and Kananga both were cities where it was possible to circulate at night – buses, street lights, etc.

Today in the area of Kananga where we lived, a generator on the property provided electricity for some time in the early morning until it was daylight. In the evening, the electricity came on from 7 to 11. Any more had to be provided by the generator. Someone said to me, “I knew Kananga when there was 24-hour electricity and water on tap!” Now water has to be bought and transported. I had the privilege of having a room with a private bathroom, toilet, shower, sink. Here everything is in place for water to be on tap once more, but it probably won't happen any time soon because the city system would need to be completely rebuilt.



There was also, at one time, a postal service, a telephone system, trains and buses. Now there is no post – the building in the city marked “La Poste” and looking fairly freshly painted is apparently used for something else, there are even some families living there. Everyone who can afford it has at least one mobile phone – the second for the times when the first network isn’t functioning. Each of the sisters of the community had a mobile phone, largely for security reasons. There are still a couple of train lines that function. I’m not sure about buses. I heard several people saying, “The State is absent”. What do you call development being undone? In this setting I guess anything that is working is a wonder. The roads in the city are full of potholes. In the countryside there are only trails. What happens in the rainy season? I understood why the vehicles of the Archdiocese and the religious congregations were four-wheel drives.

*Will there be enough water for
the jubilee celebration?*



The “Mission”

One day I was invited to go with the Bishop to visit the Benedictines (he was going to prepare the opening celebration). We also went to Mikalay, where the cathedral and the diocesan center used to be. The Benedictines are about half hour from Kananga and Mikalay about half hour further though the distance isn't really very far. The dirt roads were unbelievable as I mentioned before. I enjoyed seeing the countryside, the traditional houses along the way, built now mostly with baked bricks but most with straw thatched roofs. Seeing the children playing, waving to anyone who comes by, the folks carrying supplies either on their heads or on bicycles, moving aside as we passed... the orange-red soil that looks so rich, plenty of trees, many of them mango...

Then we came upon what fit perfectly my image of the colonial “mission”: large church, and various other large brick buildings along the road. Amazing!. Built by the Belgians this was the first church in the province of Kasai, the first Mass being celebrated in 1891. In 1959 the church became the cathedral for the new diocese of Kananga. I got a tour around only part the place: the bishop's residence, the cathedral, the convent of the sisters and the house of the brothers.



There is also a school, hospital and I don't know what else – all looking a bit dilapidated but still attractive with bricks of various shades of orange and red, matching the soil of the region. All this was built about 100 years ago by the Belgians. Victorine was sent to school here as a boarder at age 11 and has fond memories of the place and coming out by bus. The cathedral is now the parish church, as the diocesan center is now in Kananga. The convent that once housed 80 to 100 foreign sisters now has a local Congolese community of 14 sisters of St Vincent de Paul. The brothers' house is now their formation community. The Bishop is doing some maintenance on his predecessors' residence with its impressive wooden staircase that he joked about being “worthy of a bishop!” He also showed us the archives for most of the 100 years of Mikalay's existence in simple brown paper folders on open shelves! He is in the process of restoring what was a barn in the compound where we were living in Kananga to house the diocesan archives while one of the priests is being formed in Belgium as an archivist.



The Medicine Depot



Near the cathedral in Kananga we visited a large medicine depot, an NGO project under the auspices of the church, whose present director is Sr. Brigitte CIM, a large, energetic, intelligent woman with a wonderful smile. Medicine comes from the EU for the whole of the Kasai province with orders coming in from all public clinics and hospitals. I had the impression that the medicine was free of charge both from the EU and in distribution to all public clinics throughout the province. (Clinics and hospitals owned and administered by the church are considered public.) Everything is computerized: medicine in stock, what is sent out, expiration dates. There were air conditioned rooms for medications that required cool storage.

It was all incredibly well organized. I asked Sr. Brigitte what kind of training she would have had for such a task. She told me she did a program in medicine management in Europe and goes regularly for training sessions.



Young mom and baby





This was one example of what the Church does in the country. The Church has credibility outside, as well as and from within the country (e.g., the medicine depot) . Schools, clinics, technical training, even sometimes the building of roads and bridges... Of course, most of this is dependent on donations from outside the country.

Archbishop Marcel is trying to help his diocese become more self sufficient and to train clergy and laity alike to look for ways to do this. He says that fighting the mentality that “money is something you receive not something you earn” is one of his aims. For example, during a parish feast, donations received from the people should not simply be distributed or used for the feast, but could be used for something the parish needs.



The Big Party

The evening before I left Kananga the Archbishop, Marcel Madila, threw a party! Quite a lavish affair on the lawn of the compound where he lives, with improvised light, music, lots of food and drink – I wondered if others like me were asking themselves where they were! It struck me as being a bit “over the top” but in the days since I left the Congo I’ve come to see it in another way.



The Archbishop's place – the yard where the party was held the evening before I left

Sr. Astrid, who runs the Archbishop's household, with her assistant



The evening I was in Kinshasa before flying back to Cairo, at an impromptu meal of a few friends (two priests, a layman and a young woman) there was a lot of laughter and craziness that reminded me of Egyptian gatherings.

It was said several times something to the effect that we have to laugh in the evening because of so much stress during the day. I think the Archbishop went out of his way to provide an evening of joy and pleasure to the priests and sisters and outside guests who were invited to his party as a way of enabling them to feel special, even a bit spoiled and pampered in this place where everything is so difficult. The event was linked with the 50th jubilee of the diocese of Kananga, but it was scheduled at this particular time in order to include the NDS delegation.



Jubilee Celebration of the Diocese



Women bringing offerings of food at Mass

The main event for the Jubilee year took place the Sunday after I left on August 23rd. It was a Eucharistic celebration at the cathedral followed by various programs and a meal for religious, priests and lay leaders on the property where we lived.

Traditional Dancers



Drummers



Singers and Dancers



Chitah, a beautiful girl taken in by the sisters so that she could go to school – I'm not sure who the little girl with her fancy hairdo is!



Street children watching the show



Mgr Marcel with some street children at the diocesan celebration

The backup kitchen staff for the jubilee meal



The Future...

My experience in the Congo was short and rather limited in terms of visits, but it was an extremely rich one. Archbishop Marcel Madila would very much like the collaboration with the congregation to continue and develop. Our focus on the Word rooted in the Jewish tradition and our inter-faith experience are aspects he sees as contributing greatly to the future of the church in the Congo.

During the recent Synod on Africa, Mgr Marcel was able to meet with the four of us here in Rome so that he could share his vision for the diocese with us. We haven't found any answer to our question "What possible future links of Sion with Africa?", only other questions...

- How to continue the links already established with Kananga and Kisantu?
- What "face" for Sion in Africa?

Your responses, comments and questions, are valued, either here on the website, or by eMail.

Darlene



Democratic Republic of the Congo: Vital Statistics

- **Full name:** Democratic Republic of the Congo
- **Population:** 64.7 million (UN, 2008)
- **Capital:** Kinshasa
- **President:** Joseph Kabila
- **Area:** 2.34 million sq km (905,354 sq miles)
- **Major languages:** French, Lingala, Kiswahili, Kikongo, Tshiluba
- **Major religions:** Christianity, Islam
- **Life expectancy:** 45 years (men), 48 years (women) (UN)
- **Monetary unit:** 1 Congolese franc = 100 centimes
- **Main exports:** Diamonds, copper, coffee, cobalt, crude oil, coltan
- **GNI per capita:** US \$140 (World Bank, 2007)



Additional Resources

Click on the following **links** for additional information on the DR Congo:

[Chronology](#) of key events in the history of the Democratic Republic of the Congo

[Map](#) of the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Avril, Anne Catherine NDS, Lenhardt, Pierre NDS and Niesz, Louise Marie NDS. Reports on the 1990 Visit to Zaire. Available from **sionsec@tin.it**

Hochschild, Adam. *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, 1998

Butcher, Tim. *Blood River: A Journey to Africa's Broken Heart*, 2008

