**DOSSIER: WORLD DAY OF VOCATIONS 2021**

**AFRICA - Day of Vocations: for the Comboni Missionaries "good witness is contagious"**

**Rome (Agenzia Fides) -** "Africa is a continent of hope as regards to vocations to the consecrated Comboni missionary life. It is a moment of blessing as it was for Europe after the Second World War", said Fr. Elias Essognimam Sindjalim, Secretary General for the formation of Comboni Missionaries (MCCJ), in an interview with Agenzia Fides.

Can you give us an overview of the situation of Comboni vocations?

This year we have thirty-seven novices who will make their first profession in May: 8.1% come from Asia, almost 19% from America and 72.9% are African.

Theology students and brothers in the final stage of basic formation are 147 in this formative year 2020-2021. 86.39% are African, 2.04% are Asian, 10.88% are American and 0.68% European. Of these 147 students, 10% are made up of non-priest religious, brothers. It is important to underline that we are an institute of priests and brothers who carry out complementary ministries in the mission. The Comboni circumscriptions (provinces and delegations) that register the highest numbers of candidates and young people in formation in Africa are the Democratic Republic of Congo, Togo-Ghana-Benin, Mozambique, Malawi-Zambia, Uganda. Lately the numbers have been growing in South Sudan and Kenya.

In what contexts do vocations flourish?

In the history of the institute, the first African vocations came almost exclusively from the parishes and social works of the Comboni missionaries. But things have changed, by now the young people who ask to become Comboni also come from non-Comboni parishes because of globalization, but above all as the result of the missionary animation service carried out through missionary magazines and the vocational promotion on which our institute has invested as well as by the social ministries.

Most of them come from living Churches, where they have the testimony of many consecrated persons (Comboni or non) and of lay people who encourage them to choose religious life. Some say that Africans enter religious life because of poverty. I think that the real humus for vocations is the liveliness and vitality of the African local Churches, in which young people find a space for the growth of their faith. Even if this motivation for flight from poverty may exist in some candidates, it is purified in the long Comboni formative process.

What drives a young African to become a Comboni priest and missionary today?

The first cause is undoubtedly the life of faith that they live in families and local Churches, with their vitality and vivacity, as I said before. Where there is a life of faith, the Spirit is at work, and only a young person who is immersed in this life of faith can listen to the voice of God who calls him to set out on a vocational journey. The second reason is the testimony of life and mission of so many missionaries who are engaged in Africa. Many young people tell us “I want to be a missionary”, even without knowing everything regarding what it means to be a Comboni missionary. Good testimony is contagious. The third point is the social impact of missionary charitable works. In many African countries it is the social ministry of the Church (in schools, hospitals, centers for human promotion, justice, peace and integrity of creation, etc.) that saves the lives of so many people every day in a concrete way.

What challenges arise in this situation of abundance of vocations?

If vocations are a blessing, they are also a responsibility. The fact that in the face of the large numbers of candidates one has to deal with the responsibility for the quality of formation and for living the commitments of religious life throughout one's life. For this reason there are many challenges, as an example I cite the four most important. The first challenge is to discern vocations well, to accompany them and to train them to live the commitments of religious life throughout their lives. Over the past ten years, the institute has invested a lot in personnel and financial means to prepare formators and vocational promoters. The 2009 Chapter made the choice of the educational model of integration (integrating all the energies and dimensions of the person's life around the vital center which is Christ) as a model to follow in the accompaniment and formation of our candidates. For this reason, in recent years, formators and vocational promoters have been formed in this model, making use mainly of the school for formators of the Gregorian University, of the Salesian University and also of the schools for formators of alumni of the Institute of Psychology of the Gregorian university which are found in different continents. Some have also organized continental formation assemblies to carry out ongoing formation with formators and promoters and discuss together the problems of formation trying to contextualize it. The second challenge is the economic aspect, because it is necessary to adapt the formation structures to the growing numbers, invest in quality studies and have the necessary financial means to support the candidates and formators in the houses of formation. For the moment this challenge is being addressed thanks to the solidarity of the circumpscriptions of Europe and the USA and Canada. But there are also self-sustaining initiatives that are growing in the big cities where we work. The third challenge is that of interculturality, which has always been the most important challenge of our Institute because since its foundation it has been called to give witness to the Church's catholicity by forming international and intercultural communities in mission. This challenge is faced by structuring formation in Novitiates, Scholasticates and Formation Centers for Brothers with internationality. The formation projects are conceived with the aim of helping candidates to move from multiculturalism to interculturality, from a national or continental to a Catholic mentality, which embraces the fact that in Jesus Christ we are all brothers. The fourth challenge is to form for mission today. Living in a "liquid" society, one can fall into the temptation to think that mission is everywhere and forget the specifics of the Comboni mission which is the mission ad gentes, ad vitam, ad pauperes. Young people can find it hard to live what the Comboni Missionaries call the difficult mission, the mission of the periphery. For this reason, preparation for the mission is always on the horizon of the entire formation process. (SL) (Agenzia Fides, 24/4/2021)

**EUROPE/SPAIN - Day for Native Vocations: the Gospel brought by the missionaries has taken root and is bearing fruit**

**Madrid (Agenzia Fides) -** Pope Francis' suggestion to young people to ask themselves "For who am I?" (cf. Christus vivit) is the motto of the World Day of Prayer for Vocations and the Day of Native Vocations that the Church of Spain celebrates on April 25, the fourth Sunday of Easter. Organized by the Spanish Episcopal Conference (EEC), the Confederation of Religious (CONFER), the Conference of Secular Institutes (CEDIS) and the Pontifical Mission Societies (OMP), the Day is an opportunity for reflection, prayer and support for vocations, especially in mission territories.

As the booklets for the preparation and animation of the Day underline, "Native vocations are those that arise in mission territories and which often have serious material difficulties in developing. These vocations have received the Gospel from the missionaries, they are the sign that this has taken root in their cultures and become the fundamental stone for the future of their local Churches. In the last thirty years these vocations have doubled. This Day invites us to collaborate economically for their formation". For this purpose, a site has been created with the testimonies of those who have answered the Pope's existential question, which is the question that every follower of Christ should ask himself (http://paraquiensoy.com). In addition to the video testimonies of women and men who have responded with their lives, the Pope's message for this day, the manifesto, ideas for a week of prayer for catechesis for the various age groups, suggestions for a prayer vigil for young people and adults, a liturgical booklet for the fourth Sunday of Easter are all available. It also indicates how one can collaborate with the vocations of missionary countries through the Pontifical Society of St. Peter the Apostle, one of the four Pontifical Mission Societies, which focuses on indigenous vocations, to support many young people who need material resources to respond yes to their answer. The hymn of this day, by the Hakuna group, was presented on the Youtube channel of the day. On the eve of the Day, Saturday April 24, there will be a Prayer Vigil for Vocations. On April 25, the broadcasting of the Holy Mass from 2 TVE at 10:30 will allow all the faithful, who cannot participate in the Eucharist in person on Sunday, to join the common prayer of the Church for vocations. Currently, according to data from the Episcopal Commission of the Clergy and Seminaries of the Spanish Episcopal Conference, there are 1,066 major seminarians in all Spanish dioceses (62 fewer than the previous year) and 126 priests (2 more) have been ordained.

In the Spanish minor seminaries there are 827 seminarians (last year there were 890), of whom 25 went to the major seminary (3 more than the previous year).

As for religious institutes and societies of apostolic life, according to the statistics of CONFER of October 2020, their members are 37,286: of these 28,323 religious (counting 659 junior women), from 302 congregations; and 8,963 religious (with 260 juniores), from 109 institutes. This represents a decrease of 1,402 units compared to 2019. In January 2021, the data of CEDIS, the Spanish Conference of Secular Institutes, speak of 2,354 members (36 fewer than the beginning of 2020). Of these institutes, 26 are of Spanish foundation, while another 14, founded outside the national borders, have members in Spain. In all cases, their charism is to follow Christ and live their apostolic commitment integrated into the world. (SL) (Agenzia Fides, 24/4/20

**ASIA - Day of Vocations: the fulcrum of the vocations of the Verbite Missionaries in Asia**

**Rome (Agenzia Fides) -** The Congregation of the Verbite Missionaries (Society of the Divine Word, SVD), comprising priests and religious brothers, is committed to spreading the Gospel of Christ, the Son of God made man, in the world, and to promoting his reign of peace, justice and love. Founded by St. Arnold Janssen in 1875, in a short time the Congregation had a remarkable development, which brought its members, now more than 6,000, to Europe, Asia, Oceania, Africa and America. Agenzia Fides the Secretary General for Formation and Education of the Word asked some questions to Fr. Pushpa Anbu Augustine, and to the Assistant General for the Formation and Education of the Verbite Brothers, Br. Carlos José Ferrada Monntero, on the reality of vocations of the verbite in Asia.

Can we give an overview of the situation of vocations in Asia?

Today Asia is the hub of SVD Vocations. There are 20 Provinces / Regions / Missions in Asia (ASPAC Zone) and the missionaries are present in Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Indonesia, India, Japan, Korea, Philippines, Papua New Guinea, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, Timor Leste and Vietnam. Most of our vocations are from Indonesia and India. There are 396 students and 212 novices (15 brother novices) in formation from Indonesia, and 113 students and 40 novices (5 brother novices) from India. There are 62 students and 13 clerical novices in Vietnam and 54 students and 16 clerical novices from the Philippines. In all, therefore, there are currently 681 students and 283 (20 brother novices) in formation in Asia.

One of the unique features of SVD formation is that the students undergo common formation. Though most of the vocations come from Asia, they are open to serve anywhere in the SVD world in order to fulfill our missionary mandate, even if this entails leaving his own country, mother tongue and cultural milieu’.

In what context are SVD vocations born?

When the pioneering SVD missionaries came to Asia, they presented the Society as a missionary congregation and worked for the overall developments of the people. They proclaimed the Good News and stood for Gospel values. They sowed the seeds of the Word of God wherever the missionaries went. People witnessed to the committed service of the missionaries and gradually extended their helping hand. Zeal for the missions and interest to spread the Word of God is in the minds of young people. They respond willingly to God's call. When the missionaries came to frontier missions, they usually extended their service to the poor and the indigenous people. In gratitude, for all that these people received from the missionaries, some of the young people joined the missionaries to be religious.

The life of witness of SVD missionaries could be another factor: our missionaries live a simple lifestyle, serving in remote areas with commitment. When young people see such missionaries, they willingly join the congregation to be partners in the mission of God.

In the context of Asia, we find families are knit together. Certain amount of faith formation already take place in the families. Parents consider children as gift from God. Families insist on values and educate children with sense of responsibility to oneself and to others. They learn to choose their life freely and find meaning in it. Family support and encouragement enable them to continue their missionary service. There is so much of allurements in the world. Secularism, consumerism, utilitarianism have become walk of life for many. Yet, there is certain amount of religiosity that we find in Asia. In some parts of Asia, religious life is still an attraction. Of course, formation must sharpen their motivations and improve the quality of the life of our formees, who join the congregation willingly. Systematic vocation promotion is essential. Constant accompaniment and regular contacts are needed.

What drives, and what discourages, a young Asian to become a Verbite today?

SVD missionaries are always on the periphery, at the service of the last, the marginalized, and through their service "they put the last first". The service of the missionaries among the most underprivileged sections of the people, attract young persons to join the congregation and do likewise to uplift the poor and the marginalized.

The unique feature of SVD life anywhere in the world is intercultural living. In contrast to the world of individualism, cultural or national affiliations, our intercultural/ international communities become a powerful witness to values of universal brotherhood, inclusivism, and the acceptance of diversity as a gift of God and our way of life. The context of our global approach to formation with insistence on interculturality helps in the growth of vocation. Some of the young people get attracted to our way of life and join the Society.

There are important areas of mission that the SVD has outlined for all its members, these include: New Evangelization, Ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, Education and Research, and JPIC issues. When the young people see the SVD Missionaries engaged in these important areas of mission, they get attracted to SVD way of life.

In some parts of Asia, people are attracted to the beauty and the brilliance of Christian traditions. The ritualistic dimension of faith continues to attract vocations to religious life. People are more inclined towards what appeals to body and mind, festivals, popular devotions, clericalism, and dramatic liturgy. These aspects too, attract young people to become religious missionaries.

At the same time there are possible reasons that discourage them from joining the religious missionary life. The world changing trends like – globalization, secularization, migration, relativism, consumerism, and urbanization affect the mindset of the young people. Today they are overly attracted to social media, obsessed with post-modern tendencies. Undoubtedly, young people have a lot choices in life. They prefer to be economically sound and lead a comfortable life in any part of the world. Scandals caused by religious is another reason. Some of the students find the seminary formation too rigid and fail to reach the formation standards due to their attitudes and perspectives of life.

How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected vocational activity?

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a global impact and has affected every aspect of life. So also, the religious missionary vocation and formation. Some of the formation houses were able to continue their programs with restrictions, while others had to make a lot of changes and adjustments. Due to restrictions, vocation camps could not be held in many countries and the students could not be contacted personally. In some places, the formators were able to keep in touch with them, encouraging them to keep up the spiritual life and engage in some personal activities, such as social outreach programs and attended online classes. Certain amount of stress and anxiety crept into the minds of some of the students due to the fear of being infected, while a few were anxious about the members of the family too. Some of them were affected emotionally and psychologically. Sudden social distancing led to loneliness, psychological distrust, spiritual dryness and inner conflicts within them. Though the situation adversely affected vocation promotion and formation program, the Superior General and others were in touch with them, encouraging them. In spite of the pandemic, we were able to run the formation program to a great extent. The situation taught us to be creative and innovative in the formation programs. Due to restrictions, many of the activities are performed using modern technology / social media. It is the time that the religious too become active and make use of the modern technology for vocation promotion and other related activities. (SL) (Agenzia Fides, 24/4/2021)

**AMERICA/VENEZUELA - Day of Vocations: despite the economic and social crisis and the pandemic, vocations to the priesthood have increased**

**Caracas (Agenzia Fides) -** The work of promoting vocations in Venezuela is bearing fruit. This year, despite the full social and economic crisis that the country is going through, aggravated by the pandemic situation caused by Covid-19, the vocational response to the ministerial life of priesthood has increased, with a total number of 804 seminarians, including young people who are in the preparatory phase, or are studying philosophy and theology.

As reported by the Venezuelan Bishops' Conference, the various diocesan seminaries have tried to strengthen the spiritual discernment among young people through activities to promote vocational pastoral care so that they can study in depth the call of God in their lives. Of the 21 existing seminaries in the country (including three propaedeutic seminaries), 186 students are currently in preparation; 328 study philosophy and 290 theology.

As Fr. Rivelino Cáceres, Director of the Department of Clergy, Seminaries, Vocations and Permanent Diaconate emphasizes, by following the guidelines of the new Ratio Fundamentalis, "once theology studies are completed, a year of pastoral experience is carried out in a parish, under the guidance of the parish priest and of a team of seminary formators, which lasts about a year, after which the priestly ordination takes place". Currently 7 seminarians are in this process, while 2 are on mission, an experience proposed by the Seminaries of the Neocatechumenal Way.

Although the number of candidates for priesthood in Venezuela has increased this year, the Bishops' Conference continues, more vocations are needed to address the country's shortage of priests, especially in the most remote areas and in the peripheries. For this reason, Pope Francis entrusted the Diocese of San Cristóbal with pastoral care in the Apostolic Vicariate Caroní. This Vicariate is one of the areas with the greatest difficulties in accessing and communicating in Venezuela.

Therefore missionaries and above all priests are needed who guarantee the sacramental life of the communities living there. However, the increase of indigenous vocations in every region is a good sign. In the Apostolic Vicariate of Caroní there are currently 5 seminarians from the Pemon people, one of whom is about to be ordained a deacon and the other students are of philosophy and theology. There was already an indigenous seminary in the 1930s, but it had to close due to a lack of vocations. (SL) (Agenzia Fides, 24/4/2021)

**AMERICA/COLOMBIA - Day of Vocations: the missionary vocation continues to attract young people who join the Missionaries of Yarumal**

**Bogota (Agenzia Fides)** - The Institute for Foreign Missions of Yarumal (MXY) was founded in 1927 in Yarumal, a town in the diocese of Santa Rosa de Osos, for evangelization and missionary work. "Our missionaries are currently working in Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, Panama, the United States and Canada on this continent. In Africa we work in Kenya, Angola and Ivory Coast, in Asia in Cambodia and Thailand. We also have missionaries who work in Italy, Spain and Belgium", says Fr. Hernan Pinilla, MXY, of the Missionary and Vocation Animation Secretariat of the Institute. "We are currently about 180 missionaries, including temporary seminarians - he continues -. About 40 missionaries work in America, 15 missionaries in Africa, 8 missionaries in Asia. About 20 missionaries are then engaged in other services in Colombia: missionary and vocational animation, general council, administrative services. There are 30 elderly and pensioners".

Regarding the situation of vocations, Fr. Hernan Pinilla underlines: "Currently we have 22 professed seminarians who are studying theology and some of them are living a pastoral experience. About 15 students are attending philosophy courses. This year, despite the difficulties of vocational accompaniment caused by the pandemic, seven students have started the path of formation. The average number of students who have entered in recent years is between 8 and 10".

Fr. Hernan notes that the limitations of the pandemic have not affected the decision of many young people to follow God's call. "The coronavirus pandemic, with all its tragic implications, challenges our pastoral schemes, including vocational ministry, and it awakened the creativity of vocational pastoral workers. Traditional vocational meetings must be carried out through new technologies, there are few face-to-face meetings, always respecting the regulations on biosecurity, with all the care that the pandemic requires from us. However, the pandemic has not been an impediment for many young people to worry about the missionary vocation. We see with joy that God continues to call, and there are always young people ready to answer the call. The missionary vocation continues to attract many young people".

"The young people who come to our seminary - concludes the missionary -, are divided into two groups: those who have finished secondary studies and another group of those who have completed (or at least started) university or technical studies, some of whom are working in different fields. Many adults, over the age of 24, knock on our doors with the desire to be missionaries, but we cannot welcome them because they would finish the path of formation at an advanced age, we have also noticed that it is much more difficult for them to learn other languages and adapt to the needs of community life". (SL) (Agenzia Fides, 24/4/2021)

**OCEANIA/PAPUA NEW GUINEA - Day of vocations: the work of the Church to increase the quality of formation in Seminaries**

**Port Moresby (Agenzia Fides)** - "Priestly vocations in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands are increasing more in terms of quality than quantity", explains to Agenzia Fides, Fr. Jacek Tendej CM, Rector of the Holy Spirit Seminary in Bomana, Papua New Guinea (PNG) on the occasion of the World Day of Prayer for Vocations.

In the Episcopal Conference of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands there is: a major seminary (12 seminarians) and minor (96 sem.) diocesan seminaries in Vanimo; a regional propaedeutic seminary (29 sem.) in the archdiocese of Rabaul; a regional seminary in the diocese of Mount Hagen – philosophy and spiritual year; a regional seminary (54 sem.) in the diocese of Madang – propaedeutic formation; an inter-ocean seminary (53 sem.) in the archdiocese of Port Moresby – philosophy and theology for all the dioceses of PNG; and an inter-ocean seminary (42 sem.) in the archdiocese of Honiara for all the dioceses of the Solomon Islands. The Rector illustrates the renewed structure of formation introduced some years ago: "After two propaedeutic years, we continue in PNG with one spiritual year, two years of philosophical studies, one pastoral year and four years of theological studies.

After these ten years the seminarians go back to their dioceses and after around one year of pastoral experience they receive the diaconate ordination. Then after again around one year, the priestly ordination". From this it is clear that the process of formation is longer than in the other parts of the world. "One of the factors - explains Fr. Tendej - is the low level of the primary and secondary education in the country because of the lack of well prepared teachers. When in 1975 PNG become an independent country, the education also became nationalized, but without a sufficient number of prepared educational workforce. The number of private schools - in good part Catholic schools - is still decreasing and these schools are too expensive for the majority of the citizens".

"Most of the seminarians - he continues - come from the rural area where the faith was brought by the missionaries. Many of them come from the families involved in the Church activities as catechists or other lay collaborators. They have good traditional roots of Catholic faith, and now needed to deepen this by the seminary formation.

Another challenge in the intellectual formation is the language: "All the seminarians are using the language of the tribe (tok ples) as a mother tongue, and the major part of them are using Pidgin English a language born at the time of colonization. It is a very simple language to give orders, and now when used in daily life is even becoming an obstacle to a deeper thinking and communication because of a very narrow range of the vocabulary. English is for our students the third language, and they are still struggling because they use it only for study and not for daily conversations". Fr. Jacek highlights: "In spite of the above-mentioned challenges, I find my eight year service as missionary rector at Holy Spirit Seminary in Bomana very rewarding. The seminarians appreciate the discipline, the close relationship with them, and also our being with them during their activities as prayer, celebrations, works, sports, meals etc. They also express their gratitude for all works of maintenance, renovation, and beautification of the compound, the new equipment and the buildings of the seminary".

The Rector reports on the impact of the pandemic: "Since the beginning of the time of pandemic our seminarians are handling matters well. There is no panic, but rather a positive approach of more physical activities and higher hygiene of daily life. Last year we had introduced distance education by the administration of our theological institute, so this kind work and isolation restrictions gave us as formators more opportunity of deepen our relationships and spend more time together. This year after detecting in the country an increasing number of virus infections, we again have isolation and distance education, and that is a new challenge in formation for all of us. This second year of pandemic restrictions, up until now are not paralysing our formation program and our seminarians. We pray and hope we can continue this wonderful work of the formation of the clergy for the young Church in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Island. (PA-GL) (Agenzia Fides, 24/4/2021)