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AFRICA/CONGO DR - Archbishop of Kisangani "in canoe, on motorcycle, or on foot, to reach faithful in the most extensive diocese of Congo"

Kisangani (Agenzia Fides) – "It's a great joy for us. It is an opportunity to thank the Lord for what he has done for his Church, the family of God in the DRC. We thank the Holy Father for appointing Archbishop Laurent Monsegwo Pasinya, who is the third cardinal in our country. The event will be celebrated with great solemnity and great joy in the DRC. The Christian community formed by the Congolese people who live in Rome is preparing to provide a welcome worthy of the Cardinal-elect," Fides was told by Archbishop Marcel Utempi Tapa of Kisangani, Democratic Republic of Congo, in a recent interview.

Your Excellency, what are the difficulties encountered in your pastoral work?

The Archdiocese of Kisangani, with a surface area of 150 thousand km2 and a population of more than 2 million inhabitants, is the most extensive of the 47 Congolese dioceses.
Of the two million inhabitants, Catholics number 50%. There are 42 parishes, too few, given the size of the territory of the Archdiocese. The parish jurisdictions are obviously huge surface areas. To cope with this situation, we decided to create new parishes, both within the city of Kisangani and in the rest of the Archdiocese. However, this presents us with a great challenge: the shortage of priests. Their number is still insufficient. Currently we have, thank God, 50 diocesan priests and about thirty missionaries.
Our country has been heavily marked by the war that lasted several years. Several infrastructures were destroyed and the economy was severely damaged. As a result, we find it extremely difficult to ask the faithful to take responsibility for the material needs of their Church, in accord with the guidance of the Holy See and the Bishops' Conference of Congo. But, our people are very generous. They can make available to the Church all they have and all the food they can produce. In terms of offerings, we receive substantial in-kind donations. In terms of monetary donations, there are still several difficulties because the economic situation of the country remains difficult. However, we do not give up hope that one day the faithful will be able to take charge of their Church.

What are the hopes that support your mission?

We are hopeful, despite the difficulties we encounter in our pastoral work. My hope is founded on the vocational ministry, which is bearing fruit. We have 39 students in the seminary studying philosophy and theology, 97 students in the minor seminary, and 12 youth in the preparatory seminary. Hopefully, next year we will have new priests who will enable us to realize the plan of pastoral care to create new parishes. As for the laity, every year we organize a training course of 4-5 days, for the pastoral agents of the whole archdiocese.

Your Excellency, what means do you use to move around such a vast diocese?

I have a deep desire to meet all the faithful, which is why during the year I organize visits to the parishes of the Archdiocese. The faithful are very happy to meet with their Pastor. For some, it is truly a great joy for them to meet me, because it is the first time in 19-20 years that they have the opportunity to meet their archbishop.
These pastoral visits cost a lot of effort and considerable expense, but it is with joy that we engage in this mission. The cross is an integral part of the mission of the Church. Every time I arrive in one of these communities far from the center of the Archdiocese, in motorcycle, canoe, or on foot, I forget my fatigue with the warm welcome of the local faithful. The joy of being expected and then received is the first reward, followed by the joy of sowing the Word of God, administering the Sacraments, and ensuring the formation of the faithful.

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In terms of human development, what is your primary concern?

Education is something that worries me a lot. We have invested heavily in the education of young people. There are 250 primary and secondary schools, but for a population of 2 million inhabitants this is not enough. I can make a comparison with my previous experience in the Diocese of Mahagi-Nioka, where I served as bishop for seven years. The diocese has an area of 21,000 km2 and is 8 times smaller than the Archdiocese of Kisangani. Two years ago, the population there was 1,700,000, Catholics being about 60% of the population (about 900,000 souls). In the diocese, there are 500 primary schools and 200 secondary schools. A number larger than Kisangani, but insufficient to meet the needs of all. In Kisangani, I am planning on creating new schools, which is why I have contacted the Ministry of Education, which has offered us its support. (L.M.) (Agenzia Fides 06/11/2010)

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