

## **MY AFRICAN EXPERIENCE**

### **Fr. Varghese Paul, SJ**

Participating in the 23rd World Congress of UCIP (l'Union Catholique Intenationale de la Presse) at Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso has been an unforgettable and unique experience for me and for many other participants. Unlike other UCIP Congresses only two UCIP member Jesuits participated in the Burkina Faso Congress: Fr. Albert Longchamp from Switzerland and Varghese Paul (Chollamadam) from India.

Fr. Albert was elected by the UCIP General Assembly as Ecclesiastical Adviser. As one of the speakers in the Congress I gave a conference on "Inter-Religious Conflicts and Challenges of Peace" with power point presentation. Then, in the UCIP Award Function and Cultural Night at SIAO Hotel, UCIP made me its "Member of Honour" for "several decades of exemplary support for the world union and participation in its activities worldwide". The Award consists of a plaque, a citation and a traditional cap.

Many things made the UCIP Congress a memorable and outstanding event. First, it was first time in 82 year old history of UCIP a World Congress was held in Africa. It was indeed great that a small country like Burkina Faso could hold a great international event like the UCIP World Congress. Almost every one of the 455 participants from 48 countries representing all five continents acknowledged the African Congress a remarkable success.

Second, the UCIP Congress was truly African in many respects. Most participants were Africans. Most intellectual contributions for the Congress also came from media professionals in Burkina Faso and in other parts of Africa. Of course, as an international Congress the media professionals from other continents too contributed papers and other study materials on the Congress theme: "Media at the Service of Justice, Peace and Good Governance in a World plagued by Inequalities and Poverty".

Third, Though some people have had misgivings about UCIP holding the Congress in Africa, the Congress did achieve its goals and objectives like bringing world media people together and sharing and highlighting the realities of Burkina Faso and the whole of African continent for the rest of the world. The media professionals who came from outside Africa and the African media people too got first time the opportunity to learn and understand the African situations from the Africans themselves.

Fourth, as in every congress, the African Congress too was an occasion for the participants like me to meet old friends and make new ones in the profession and enrich oneself and the media profession. There were a lot of sharing and exchanging views outside the Congress sessions held in the Conference Hall of Ouaga 2000.

Fifth, For me and I believe, for many other participants one of the most outstanding feature of the Congress was the hospitality of Africa and Burkina Faso in particular. Right from landing at the airport or reaching the Congress venue, the local organizers treated the participants without any distinction of race or colour of skin as their honoured and esteemed guests. The organizers

did everything desirable for the delegates to enjoy their stay at Ouagadougou and actively participate in the Congress.

Sixth, the UCIP Congress at Ouagadougou stands out an example to future congresses. I marveled at the way the local media professionals headed by the President of National Organizing Committee Mr Alexandre Le Grand Rouamba, the civic authorities under the leadership of the President of Burkina Faso Mr Blaise Compaore himself, and the ecclesiastical dignitaries led by the President of the Episcopal Conference of Burkina-Niger, Msgr. Seraphin Rouamba coordinated and contributed immensely to make the Congress a great success.

Seventh, personally it was a memorable experience for me to witness the happy co-existence of historical traditions of Burkina Faso represented by Emperor of Mosse, His Majesty Le Moogho Naba Baongho and the people of Manega on one side and the modernity represented by the people in capital city of Ouagadougou on the other side. The interview with the Emperor of Mosse and the visit to Manega museum remain etched in my memory.

All these experiences were common with all the Congress participants. But as a Jesuit I have a privileged experience of companionship of the Jesuits in Burkina Faso. As soon as my friends picked me up from the Airport and reached me a 4 star Hotel Joly, I phoned Adret Bokatoula in the Jesuit residence in the city. The Superior Fr. Jacques Fedry had e-mailed me that he would be out of town and that I should contact Adret. He came immediately telling me without words that Jesuits anywhere in the world are truly friends in the Lord. After a chat Adret was ready to take me to the Jesuit House. But my friend and local organizer Alexandre advised me to stay in the hotel.

Late on September 18th when I reached hotel after a Congress dinner, I phoned again Adret and told him that I would be free the next day morning to go the Jesuit residence. He told me immediately that he would come pick me up the next day morning. I was honoured that not only Adret but the Superior Fr Jacques came to take me to the Jesuit house some 10 kms away in an old part of Ouagadougou city quite different from the newly developed posh area of Hotel Joly.

I enjoyed for 3 days Jesuit companionship and hospitality. On Sunday September 19th I attended an evening Holy Mass with Adret in St Peter's parish church. During the Congress I had the opportunity to concelebrate the Eucharist in three other parishes including the Cathedral Church. All the Churches were packed with people indicating the strong presence of Catholics in the city and their faith.

The Jesuits are managing the Centre of study and reflection for primary to college level Students known as C.E.R.C.L.E. The Director of the Centre, Fr. Jacques took me around the spacious Centre and showed me the many facilities there. I also met a few of the lay collaborators helping in the Centre. Adret is a student- animator and professor in the Centre. C.E.R.C.L.E. is certainly an invaluable place for students especially the poor for personal study and research.

Another very interesting place where Fr. Jacques took me was the Spirituality Centre called "Paam-Yoodo" in the outskirt of the city. I was looking forward to the visit as I had already met

Fr. Goytisolo Augustin and Fr. Lescene Gilbert of the Centre. They had joined us for the birthday meal of Fr. Goytisolo in the Jesuit residence on September 20.

The Jesuit tertianship for West African Province is also situated in the Spirituality Centre. We met there Fr. Jean Ilboudo de la Theotokos, the Tertian Instructor, whose inspiring book “Via Crucis Africae” was already gifted to me by Fr. Jaques. After seeing a few of his booklets displayed in C.E.R.C.L.E., I was very happy to meet the author. We took lunch with Fr. Ilboudo and a few of the 11 Jesuit tertians there eating a traditional food called “toe” made of maze with vegetable gravy.

My visit to the calm and quiet Spirituality Centre in the lap of nature was like making a spiritual journey. (contact the author: [ciss@satyam.net.in](mailto:ciss@satyam.net.in))

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