

YOUTH APOSTOLATE IN RURAL AFRICA

The Executive Committee of S.E.C.A.M., in collaboration with the Superiors General of Congregations (male and female) working in Africa, took as its theme for 1983 "The Apostolate of Rural Youth". A dossier on this subject was submitted to all the bishops of Africa. The following gives the essential points of discussion and the lines of action proposed:

1) NEGLECT OF THE RURAL POPULATION

- Despite the growth and development of several big cities Africa remains a predominantly agricultural continent.
- The rural population suffers from poverty and ignorance. The causes are multiple: uneven distribution of available land, lack of productivity, ignorance of modern methods of agriculture, lack of training and leadership.
- Young people suffer more keenly from these rural problems:
 - lack of schools, or of places in those which exist,
 - high drop-out rate because of unsuitable programs for rural life,
 - teachers who are poorly trained, badly paid and who, consequently, have little interest in their work.

This list of problems is not exhaustive. Those who are in close contact with rural Africa could complete it and perhaps suggest some solutions to the condition of endemic poverty.

2) NEEDS AND ASPIRATIONS OF YOUTH

The rural world is not closed in on itself. It shares the incessant mobility of the modern world. The mass media puts it in contact with the whole world. It learns the history, the way of life, the cultural and religious heritage of other peoples. Young people in rural Africa are aware of all this, hence their aspirations for a better life and their desire to satisfy new needs.

Family life and marriage

They want to free themselves from traditional customs such as payment for a wife and the inheritance system, but at the same time maintain the principle of the extended family and use it intelligently. Many prefer the ideal of monogamy to the traditional polygamy.

Society

They want socio-political reform as well as reform of the educational system which is at the root of many of the problems of rural society. There is a growing spirit of individualism and a consequent loss of the spirit of solidarity.

Religious beliefs

Young people are beginning to question ancestral rites and practices. They are less willing than their parents to have their lives governed by religious rites. Therein lies the challenge to the Church. How can we create a synthesis of the world inherited from ancestors and the modern world, between traditional beliefs and faith in Jesus Christ?

3) DIFFICULTIES OF THE YOUNG

The influence of the elders is a tremendous force in rural society and weighs heavily on the young. The pressure of society, of the family, of the tribe is still felt even in middle age. Among young people, ancestral customs are no longer regarded as forces of cohesion in society so much as a straight jacket which prevents growth in the individual. Pressure is also exerted by religions such as Islam and by certain Christian sects as well as by modern ideologies such as marxism and apartheid.

4) PRIORITIES IN THE APOSTOLATE OF RURAL YOUTH

The Church in Africa has always tried to meet the needs and aspirations of young people. It has established schools of all kinds; Secondary, Technical, Trade and Agricultural Schools, apprentice training and health services.

For their formation as Christians the Church has tried to provide catechetical instruction at their level, has organised small Christian communities, has established houses for prayer and multi-purpose centers. It has formed youth organisations such as J.A.C. (Young Christian Agricultural Workers) which are best adapted to rural conditions.

5) NEW LINES OF ACTION IN THE APOSTOLATE

Though the work accomplished by the Church, including that of the Religious Congregations, has been very important there remains an enormous amount to be done. Some new lines of action proposed are:

- Africanisation of schools to bring them within the reach of rural children. This means adopting programs suitable to rural conditions.

- Respecting African culture and languages while at the same time providing modern technical training.
- The establishment of schools which will prepare students for afterlife.

- *Collective development*

Through the school we must aim at influencing the entire village.

- *Restoring the sense of solidarity*

As in cities, the rural population is threatened by individualism and self-interest.

- *Developing a critical outlook*

This is essential in one-party states where all are expected to follow the government line. It is equally important in the face of certain traditions carried over from the past and which are at variance with the teaching of the Gospel.

6) PRIORITIES FOR EDUCATORS

Here we shall mention only a few:

- Awareness of rural problems. This means the numerical importance of young people in rural areas and taking account of their difficulties and special needs.

- Suitable Training, particularly in technical subjects. This implies getting to know the needs of rural areas and acquiring the necessary technical ability to deal with them.

- An essential quality is that of being able to form relationships. Young people expect their educators to be approachable and sympathetic, to interest themselves in their personal lives in the village, to boost their self-confidence by allowing them to speak for themselves and look after themselves, to speak to them of God in a language they can understand.

- *Example of one's own life*

"Modern man pays more attention to witness than to masters, and if he listens to masters it's because they are witnesses."

St. John Baptist de La Salle and the problems of rural youth

— De La Salle was well aware of the problems of young people in the country.

"The good priests of the countryside sought a remedy for the ills which the servant of God had long deplored.

He was more anxious than they to heal the wounds that were becoming fatal for the poor people of the rural areas."

— The work was appropriate for the Brothers.

"The Brothers could do in the villages the good work they were doing in the towns. They would even have done the work more easily as the country children were more docile and the parents less troublesome."

— De La Salle would not allow the Brothers to take on the work for financial and community reasons.

"The poor country parishes had not sufficient funds to support two Brothers nor enough work for them. There was no question of sending a single Brother as de La Salle had made it a rule never to send less than two Brothers."

— De La Salle established a seminary for country schoolmasters.

"He encountered many obstacles and tried several times to re-establish it. (We know of three attempts — two in Paris and one in Rheims) "He gave up the idea after the third attempt, deciding to leave the task to others whom God would inspire to undertake it" (Extracts from Blain and Bernard).

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