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THE APOSTOLATE OF URBAN YOUTH IN AFRICA

Brother Vincent Rabemahafaly, Secretary to "African Encounter and Collaboration", continues to deal here with the problem of youth which is one of the principal preoccupations of the Church in Africa. R.C.A. is an organization for collaboration between the Conference of African Bishops and the Superiors General of Congregations working in Africa. The last number of "Lasalliana" contained an article on the Apostolate of Rural Youth. This is the other half of the picture, the Apostolate of Urban Youth.

I) THE FACTS

First of all there is the huge proportion of young people resulting from a spectacular population explosion. Africa has a young population, being composed, for the most part, of countries with 45 to 50% of the people under 15 years and about 55 to 60% under 25.

Besides the numerical importance of the young there are two additional factors: the rapid urbanization of Africa which sees mushroom cities spring up at an alarming rate and the exodus from rural areas which, together with urbanization, affects mainly the young.

Several causes explain this fact which it would be interesting to study in each sector of the population.

The African urban population is composed of young people. A typical example is Nairobi where 78% of the inhabitants are under 30 and, of these, 30% are between 15 and 20 years of age.

II) CATEGORIES OF YOUNG TOWNDWELLERS

★ Educated young people. This is the largest group comprising pupils of primary and secondary level and the students from whose ranks comes the challenge to established institutions. This group has benefited most from the work of the Church.

★ Young Workers. These are people who can fend for themselves but who are often exploited because they have no work contracts. No trades union looks after their interests. The Church is still seeking a means of helping them.

★ The young unemployed or job seekers. Coming from the villages or "shanty towns" they seek casual work to survive. They are the "Parking Boys" or "Carry your parcel, Ma'm Boys" of the large cities. They are not only left to their wretched lot but are mistrusted because of their misdeeds.

★ Groups of young people brought together by ethnic, cultural or regional ties. These groups play the part of traditional age groups.

★ Young people in public service: army recruits, police recruits, civil servants. We could add to these the younger members of the single political party, a phenomenon common in Africa.

★ Juvenile delinquents. Delinquency among the youth of the rapidly expanding cities is a major problem. Alcoholism, drug abuse and prostitution are on the increase.

QUESTIONS. Are there other such groups of young people in the city or town where your Community is at work? Which group is most at risk and what would you propose to do in order to help its members?

III) ASPIRATIONS AND NEEDS OF URBAN YOUTH

A) Urban youth has many desires and aspirations, not all of equal value.

★ They want to enjoy to the full the benefits of modern civilization. That means a comfortable life symbolised by a well-furnished home, a car and plenty of money and they will go to any lengths to get them. This desire to enjoy the comforts of modern life does not take away, however, a certain nostalgia for traditional society which appears to them a lost paradise and which they would like to see revived. Community spirit is still strong amongst them, and if many students aspire to a respectable position it is because they want to be in a position to help the family and social group.

★ They want to have a profession or a trade in order to find work. Diplomas are often over valued in the struggle for professional status, but it frequently happens that because the school is ill adapted to African needs many young people find themselves without any practical training. The qualified young person knows very well that personal worth is not enough and that he must win the favour of the personnel manager in the traditional manner. Once employed he must turn a blind eye to corruption, otherwise he risks finding himself in the unemployment queue. In the face of such difficulties the young person does not know where to turn.

★ Young people seek justice and freedom. In general, they support the objectives, often praiseworthy enough, of the party in power in their country but feel that in daily life the fine speeches about progress and justice are rarely put into practice. This leads to frustration. It is the students who show most daring in expressing their aspirations for freedom and justice.

★ Openness to and desire for a spiritual dimension. There is in the African soul a strong inclination to mysticism. Large numbers of young Africans belong to the existing religious system with its multiplicity of sects which have sprung up everywhere. To this is added a tendency to go back to ancient traditions and cultural habits.

★ Demand for a Church more congenial to the African soul. Accusing the institutional Church of having compromised with the colonial regimes, some young Africans consider it a factor in their alienation. They do not feel at home in a Church which preaches a morality so foreign to them and so demanding. They would like the Church a little less clerical and much more simple, less associated with the great and more in sympathy with ordinary people...

B) Needs of the young. Parallel with the aspirations of young people there are real needs which a realistic apostolate should try to meet.

The R.C.A. report examines some of these needs. We shall merely mention them:

- need for family solidarity and assistance;
- need for an education which is adapted to the milieu and a preparation for living;
- need for responsible adults who will serve as leaders and examples in social life;
- need to understand the Christian faith better and to express it in terms of their own culture;
- need for a basic ecclesiastical community, a Church of the people of God, more committed to the struggle for justice.

IV) HOW ARE THESE NEEDS TO BE MET?

The answer to this question concerns several sectors of the apostolate. The most relevant of which are:

★ *Catechesis*. Several initiatives have been taken in this field by different local churches. However, it must be admitted that the level of religious knowledge leaves much to be desired. This points to a lack of basic Christian formation and poses the following questions:

What is the content of the catechetical syllabus and who is responsible for drawing it up? What part do parents and former students play in this particular apostolate? Is there coordination or dispersal of efforts among those whose duty it is to educate young people in the faith whether in the school or outside of it?

★ *Education through the school*. There is a need to re-examine the work of the schools in the light of the present crisis in the African educational system. In face of the pressure for diplomas which favours individual development and becomes a divisive factor in society because it encourages an elitist mentality, it might be well to give more thought to the suggestion of a school for collective development. This means:

- taking as objective the advancement of a whole group rather than preparation for diplomas;
- encouraging a sense of community betterment;
- emphasizing the role of parents and community leaders.

★ *Extra-mural education*. There is a lot more that can be done in this field:

- development of all the means of promoting informal education such as: youth movements, discussion groups, social awareness groups, use of radio and television to encourage the emergence of Christian leaders capable of contributing to the betterment of African society;
- more attention to the poor and emarginated: living among them and creating, in collaboration with them, forms of collective education leading to the formation of sharing communities.

Other initiatives have still to be taken in favour of children in unsuitable homes, of the unemployed and of the children who roam the streets of African cities and towns.

The apostolate of African youth as proposed by R.C.A. has a close resemblance to the educational apostolate of St. John Baptist de La Salle who took many steps to meet the needs of urban youth in his own time. Did he not provide a home for the young Irish boys, the sons of those exiled with King James II? Did he not open a Sunday school for young sailors in Calais, a residential school for the sons of middle class parents and another for the "libertins et indociles" whom we would call today juvenile delinquents?

Following in the footsteps of de La Salle his disciples are today trying in different ways to meet the manifold needs of the young people of Africa's towns and cities.

What new initiative can your Community take here and now?

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