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## OPERATION MIGRATION A Community Project in Africa

"The service of the poor through education is a work of preference for us as Brothers of the Christian Schools. This is made clear by the sense of unity among men in the world today, by the appeals of the Second Vatican Council and of recent Popes, by the fact of our religious vocation which dedicates us in a special manner to the imitation of Christ and by fidelity to the specific intentions of our Founder". (*Declaration 28,1*)

The migration project had its origins in the realization by those in charge of the mission at Nkolmébanga, 40 km. north of Yaoundé, that something would have to be done about the serious socio-economic problems of the area. They were moved to action by the desperate situation of the village people and particularly of the youth of the region.

It was not simply a question of bringing aid to the people but of radical change and improvement through the acquisition of more land, training in agricultural techniques, development of health services, and Christian education.

The Brothers were asked to take charge of the project because of its educational character. This meant bringing the school to the village. After all, the Institute gives preference to the poor and commits the Brothers to the service of those whose poverty constitutes an obstacle to their human development and to their reception of Jesus Christ. (C.R. 1g)

### I. A REGION IN DECLINE

The Department of Léiké is situated in a forest region to the north of Yaoundé. The population is engaged almost exclusively in agriculture and the towns are comparatively small. Living conditions in the area are becoming more and more difficult as the population continues to increase and the land becomes exhausted due to misuse.

Traditional methods of farming combined with the lack of fertilizers, either natural or chemical, and the impossibility of resting certain areas because of pressure of population, have caused serious deterioration of the soil. Léiké was the first Department to introduce cacao production. Plantations cover one third of available land but the average age of the trees is 35 years. Production is around 250 kg. per hectare whereas it could be 1000 kg. per hectare. Most of the plantations will have ceased production within a short time because of ageing of the trees.

While the region experiences a decline in agriculture the population is increasing at an alarming rate to a density much too high for the type of agriculture practised. The Nkolmébanga mission area has a population density of more than 150 to the square kilometre. The result is that there is not enough land available for the younger generation and there will be less in the years to come.

However, on the other side of the river Samaga, the Department of Mban has a population density of only 5 persons per square kilometre and has ample land available. A recently built bridge makes communication between the two Departments easier with the result that many villagers from Léiké have moved of their own accord to the other side of the river. But such migration is becoming more difficult because of the rise in the price of land caused by the influx of settlers. People have to move farther on and it is then that the real problems begin.

One senses a feeling of despair among the people in the face of a hopeless situation. "The earth is dead", they say. The fall in production has brought a reduction in money income resulting in a mass exodus from the countryside which could have dramatic consequences for the country in a very short time: ageing of the rural population and overcrowding in the towns with all the social and economic problems that that entails.

But the people have neither the material means nor necessary techniques to prevent exhaustion of the soil or to undertake a migratory movement in reasonable conditions: cost of transport and installation, food supply for the first year while awaiting new crops, infrastructures such as roads, water supply etc. In the face of such a hopeless situation the people remain passive because they do not know what to do to escape from it and have not got the will to try.

### II. OBJECTIVES OF THE MIGRATION PROJECT

The aims of the project are simple: to restore life to the village and to make the people masters of their destiny. Restoring life to the village does not mean creating new structures to "serve" the villagers — structures that collapse as soon as the organiser departs. It consists in meeting the people and finding out their needs, in helping them to organize their own lives, in restoring hope to the adults and giving the young an interest in village life. This is what is happening in the pioneer village of Issandja-Mifoumbé where we are creating an attractive, dynamic village community.

The first thing we had to do was to set up a village. It was not easy in a forest region where there was no road, no water supply, not even a hut. But necessity is the mother of invention!

Re-settlement on new land solves only the immediate problem. The essential is to ensure that the same problems will not re-appear after a generation or two. It is necessary, therefore, to open up new horizons for the people by educating them. With this in mind we help them to try out new methods of farming to increase production while maintaining the fertility of the soil. We concentrate on two kinds of cultivation: growing of food crops by the women for home consumption and production of cash crops, mainly plantain and cacao, by the men. In this way the families are better fed and there is more money for the purchase of tools, equipment etc.

To enable the people to lead healthier and fuller lives we encourage them to form village health committees to look after water supplies, sanitation and the setting up of local pharmacies.

A community which takes in hand its material welfare should also take charge of its spiritual animation. Beginnings were slow but at present five pioneers are undergoing a course in doctrinal formation. You may ask, why five? It is because animation of the community must be a communal effort. The community must not avoid its responsibility by passing it over to a semi-permanent catechist. Many villages without a priest, in some of the older Catholic countries, could well copy the Sunday liturgy of Mifoumbé!

### **III. MIFOUMBE - AN AUTHENTIC VILLAGE COMMUNITY**

The site given by the chief of Issandja at 12 kilometres from the village has now become the new village of Mifoumbé.

#### **1. On the material side**

- 62 holdings, each of 8 hectares, have been staked out and fenced. 59 pioneers have begun planting banana and cacao trees. Some of these are already producing.
- 59 plots of savannah land, each of 50 ares, have been allocated for the building of huts and the production of food. 40 huts have been built and 12 more are under construction.
- Two buildings (part brick) have been erected — one for the Brothers and the other, the "Pioneer House", with a tool store, an office for the group leader, a clinic and a meeting hall.
- The school is almost finished and awaits authorization to open.
- A well has been sunk and some dozens of toilets provided.
- A village palm grove has been planted with specially selected saplings.
- Roads, bridges, etc. are in course of construction.

#### **2. On the human side**

- 59 pioneers, between 40 and 50 of them permanent. Others come and go, discouraged, no doubt, by the initial difficulties and by family problems. Some came simply to claim land but with no intention of remaining. The average age of the pioneers is 40 years but 16 of them are under 30.
- A community of three Brothers who initially confined themselves to teaching the village children but who now admit children from other villages.

#### **3. Community organization**

This village is not just a collection of individuals. It is an authentic village community welded together in hardships and effort.

The first pioneers drew up pretty strict regulations for the life of the group: rules for admission and exclusion and for the ordering of village life. A council, elected for three years, is responsible for applying the regulations and for the organization of the weekly community work. This is essential in a place where there were no roads, bridges or buildings and which received no help from the state. The council also settles disputes among the pioneers who meet regularly on Tuesday evenings. A kind of direct democracy!

It is this cohesion, in spite of the inevitable tensions, this community organization, not necessarily evident in view of natural individualism, which has brought the village into being, and helped it survive through difficult times and put down roots. The role of the Brothers in the village is more that of catalysts than of leaders. Our financial limitations do not permit us to play such a role.

#### **4. The part played by the Brothers**

"The service of the poor... requires a genuine participation in the life of the poor... a courageous, personal and community practice of poverty". (*Declaration 34,2*)

The presence of the Brothers at the founding of this village community is not without importance. We also have experienced an exodus. We also have lived in precarious shelters and gone without food. It is not enough to accompany the migrants. One must live with them, share their joys and their sorrows and take part in the construction of their village. It is this "living-with" people which has created between the Brothers and the pioneers a bond of fellowship.

#### **5. The village and the local Church**

The migration project was launched by the Catholic mission. It is encouraged by Msgr. Zoa, Archbishop of Yaoundé, who sees in this kind of work a form of the Church's presence and her interest in the whole man, both body and soul. We are trying, in this project, to follow the lines of "Populorum Progressio" and Paul VI's letter to Cardinal Roy. But a lot still remains to be done to make this a work of true evangelization. Does the same not hold good for every Brother irrespective of the form of his apostolate?

### **CONCLUSION**

The work we are trying to do is very different from that of Brothers in the classroom but it has the same purpose: to help those with whom we come in contact to become masters of their destiny. We feel that we are truly Brothers in this work for the village and the future of its people. What can be more exhilarating than to give hope to people and to provide land for the young who did not dare hope? It is an exciting experiment in which our community is privileged to share, but much remains to be done before we can really "announce to the poor a Gospel of liberation", to quote the Cameroonian theologian, J.M. Ela, and before we discover the full prophetic meaning of the words of John Paul II, "Man is the way to the Church".

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