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Ordo  
Cisterciensium S.O.

## **Abbas Generalis**

Prot. N° 96/AG/04

Rome, 11 July 1996

Feast of Saint Benedict

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

In a letter of last 13 May sent from our monastery of Les Gardes where I was at the time, I told you of the exile of our Brothers of Mokoto. On the 10 and 12 of last May, they had to leave their monastery hurriedly, fearing an armed attack by the Hutu against the Tutsi brothers of the community and the numerous Tutsi refugees who were in the monastery. Our Brothers then went safe and sound to Buhimba, near Goma, and spent some days at the Maria Mama Centre, with our Sisters, the Bernardines of Esquermes. The media gave the sad account of this attack which in fact took place: between 100 and 150 persons were killed in the monastery church, the cells of the brothers, the cellar, and the banana plantation. The monastery was completely pillaged and sacked; the cattle stolen.

I wanted to visit them as soon as possible, but the events of Atlas intervening the following week didn't permit me to go immediately to Zaire. From 21 June to 9 July I was able, with Father André, to visit the communities of Mokoto, Clarté-Dieu and Butende. We spent 7 days with the brothers of Mokoto.

During the month following their departure from Mokoto, 4 brothers were able, on two occasions, to return under military escort to the monastery of Mokoto. They were able to see on the spot the extent of the material damage, as well as traces of blood in various places in the church and monastery. They were able to recover a few collections of books they had hidden under the eaves during the two days when six brothers stayed in the monastery between 10 and 12 May, as well as certain objects (a fridge, the generator, a churn) which had not been taken away or broken by the people. The local population had taken part in this attack and this is without doubt what hurts the community most deeply, for they feel betrayed and rejected by those they have helped over the years. In the village, were found in a somewhat poor condition, the cowls and liturgical vestments (chasubles, stoles), of the brothers. All the documents preserved in the Prior's office, as well as the archives, were scattered or destroyed. The brothers were able to save their lives but they have lost everything else. Needless to say, a return to Mokoto cannot be foreseen before many years, even supposing that the situation evolves in a positive manner in this region and that a process of reconciliation could take place.

Both the brothers of Mokoto and I are wondering: how can we explain what has happened? What caused it? Why? It isn't easy to give a definitive answer to these questions. It seemed pretty obvious to us that there wasn't one cause but several and that they were not always clear. Leaving aside political and historical causes, we were able to enumerate the following:

- Not having wanted to pay the required "contribution", seeing that this contribution was used to buy arms and ammunition.
- Not having accepted that the "combatants" undertook to protect the herd of cattle by force of arms.
- Having accepted and protected Tutsi refugees since the beginning of the year.
- Having preserved good relations with the traditional authorities of the Hundé ethnic group.
- Unfounded suspicions of sympathies or of passing on of information from one band opposed to the other.
- Instigation to violence by armed groups coming from other neighbouring regions.

But perhaps, in the last analysis, the deepest cause which could have provoked the attack was the desire of the community to maintain a difficult position of neutrality in an evangelical attitude of reconciliation and peace. For this, we can say that what Scripture tells us "*It is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil*" (1 Pet. 3: 17), was realized at Mokoto.

I found the brothers in a fairly spacious house, placed at their disposal by Mgr. Faustin Ngabu, bishop of Goma. The religious communities of Goma had also come to their help, providing food, beds, tables, benches, crockery, Psalters; in short, all the bare necessities. The brothers had left in two groups, but each time in great haste. And so they left with very few things, in most cases only with the clothes they were wearing at the time of their departure. The house has been turned into a temporary monastery with a chapel, dormitory rooms shared by two or three brothers, a refectory, a scriptorium-chapter, etc. The space is restricted but well used. The property is less than a hectare; the soil, composed of volcanic residue, makes it impossible to cultivate a garden. Manual labour, therefore, is reduced to cooking, very simple, and to housework. For 22 brothers, mostly young, this factor leads to an imbalance in the monastic day, even if they try to use the free time well.

During my stay with them, I met with each of the brothers and we had four very good community discussions, two of which lasted more than two hours. I was very struck by the quality of these discussions and the great respect not only brotherly but affectionate, with which each brother was welcomed in his response and his personal choice. The main problem remains the safety of the brothers. The Tutsi Brothers are the first concern, but the other Brothers are also in danger. The Father Prior, Dom Dhelo, has been openly threatened with death on several occasions for having helped Tutsis, an ethnic group to which he himself doesn't belong. At the end of our discussions, I asked each of the brothers to say in the presence of the whole community what he wanted to do: stay there with the community or go provisionally to another monastery of the Order. And so 8 brothers asked to go for a time to another monastery; some will take advantage of this time to undertake technical or theological studies. As there are already three brothers studying, the community present in Goma will be about 12 brothers. Procedures have already been put in motion to help the brothers to obtain the official documents (passport, visa) and to make their way to other houses of the Order.

As for the Brothers who will remain in Goma, they have chosen to take up a small property they have owned for a long time beside Lake Kivu, in Goma. It is a parcel of 2 hectares to which they would need to add 2 more hectares, compensating the local people who live there. They would then need to build a provisional settlement which would enable them to embrace once more a more regular monastic life style for the next few months.

A meeting with the bishop of Goma made me see that the situation of our Brothers is far from exceptional. In fact, they are the last to have withdrawn to Goma. All the other religious communities and all the diocesan priests did so last January. The priests, for the most part, are lodged in the diocesan house. The church of Goma, which has held a clear position against the genocide perpetrated in Rwanda in 1994, is threatened. The town of Goma (100,000 inhabitants) is surrounded by camps of Hutu refugees: there are more than 300,000 of them. The tension is very strong, and everything could explode at any moment. The presence of our Brothers at Buhimba, with the Bernardines, aroused strong reactions in the nearest camp: they mistook our Brothers for an armed group, and since then the Sisters have been visited and harassed on several occasions. Two brothers who visited them during these past few days were seized and tortured by the soldiers of the camp and then released. In this context, it is possible that the brothers who have chosen to remain in Goma in solidarity with the local Church, may also be forced to seek refuge somewhere else, perhaps outside the country.

During the past years, many of our communities, especially Notre Dame de l'Atlas, have chosen to remain in stability in the place of the monastery, in spite of the dangers surrounding them. We certainly all appreciate the Gospel value of this option. But it is, obviously, not the only possible Gospel option. The Master himself has told us: "*Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. [...] When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next*" (Matt. 10: 16. 23).

So once again I ask your prayer for the Church of Goma and for the community of Mokoto who follow in the footsteps of Christ from day to day in an extremely precarious situation. The Brothers, who belong to different ethnic groups, have a very good spirit and hope to be able to come together again when the situation allows it. This "*all together*" (*pariter*) takes on a very special emphasis, on this feast of our Father Saint Benedict

In Mary of Saint Joseph,

Bernardo Olivera  
Abbot General