

COVID 19 - OUR EXPERIENCE

In DR Congo, the Covid entered quite slowly and not very strongly. As early as March the borders were closed and barrier measures to respond to a possible spread of the virus were put in place, especially in Kinshasa, which was the epicentre of the outbreak of coronavirus cases due to many people travelling to and from the capital.

Kinshasa was therefore confined and only the transport of food and basic necessities was permitted, under the strict control of the police along the roads. All other trips were suspended.

Unfortunately, corruption has been mixed with the Government's planned response, and the countless cases of harassment to people through false controls, extortion, false reports of contamination have been a factor of dispersal and slowness in dealing with the problem at a rational level.

The Church, as always, has invested a great deal in prevention, with discernment and precision. However, it is not her role to take charge of an intervention that is at the prerogative of the State. And the state, unfortunately, does not seem to have a real solution.

Although preventive measures at the international airport had been taken seriously from the beginning of the pandemic, having learnt from the experience of the Ebola epidemic in 1997 - which continues today - it can be said that, taken in general, the Congolese did not have the ease and speed to understand the scope of the danger and the true proportions of the tragedy that has struck the rest of the world. There are many who still believe that this is an invention!

In the beginning, the Italian sisters in particular and all the older sisters of our Community certainly grasped and lived the tragedy of the pandemic with a very involved conscience while the young sisters needed more time to realize that it was affecting Africa too, at least indirectly, that is to say in terms of economy, security and culture, beyond the increase in contagions and deaths.

From the beginning of the confinement, the monastery did not have to observe all the protective measures - mandatory elsewhere - such as wearing the mask, social distancing, or the closure of the small shop, ... Of course, we closed the guesthouse and cancelled the planned sessions of the Inter-Congregations Theological Studium and the young postulants, followed the basic hygienic prescriptions and at the Sunday Mass we admitted a very small number of faithful, but overall we did not experience great sacrifices in terms of daily practices, such as liturgy, or interpersonal relations.

Every day, at the end of the Mass, the Community recites the prayer to St. Michael Archangel, to implore the end of the pandemic.

Almost all the sisters noticed that the more appropriate and spontaneous reaction to the tragedy was more prayer, personal and in community, silent or explicit, in solidarity and intercessory.

More profoundly, the Community has experienced an instant call to the conversion and authenticity of the monastic dimension of our life. A commitment of compassion and mutual charity imposed itself, at the simple thought that a very large number of brothers and sisters in humanity suffered from loneliness, separation, death without the comfort of the sacraments, as well as a hasty and anonymous burial.

The two prayers of Pope Francis, which each sister recited during the month of May, opened even more eyes and hearts to all the tragedies that the world was going through at the moment. Drama of impotence, of increasing mortality among medical and nursing staff, the need to invest in research rather than on weapons and wars, ...: a content that was concrete enough to be the subject of our prayers and entreaties.

One sister acknowledges that because of this serious situation for the whole world, her personal work of victory over her pretensions has borne the fruit of a greater freedom and sense of the evangelization of the workers, for which she is responsible, by teaching them to pray every morning, before starting work.

Another sister found herself in an attitude of gratitude to the Lord, which is truer and more responsible: she felt strongly the question in her heart "Lord, where are you?" "How can you recognize yourself in this circumstance?" but also an urgent duty to respond to the call to witness, which is addressed above all to the religious.

Another sister was struck by the terribly sad way in which people were dying. There were things you had never heard before and for this reason she was more committed to remembering God in the name of a world that forgets their Creator, with his laws and commandments.

Another sister reflected on the coincidence of the expansion of the epidemic, with all the consequences of confinement and the stopping of social life of almost all the countries of the world with the time of Lent, as if reality had imposed on all humanity a time of silence and sacrifice, of interiority and of rediscovering family ties.

Many others confessed a realization that having the daily Eucharist was a very rare privilege and therefore bore a responsibility.

To each, therefore, was given a word and a work.

The Community has lost a friend with the Covid. He was a dear friend, a very popular and much-loved missionary in Congo and so, the thought of death, of our own death too, began to preoccupy our own thoughts.

One choice we made at the community level was to keep the workers for the rest of the lockdown, when many companies were firing them. We were able to do this because in Kikwit it was not dangerous. However, the decision to take the risk and continue to pay the workers, despite our economic difficulties, came above all from the great solidarity we feel for so many families who would have struggled to survive without this wage which, although modest, still manages to feed the children and all the inhabitants of the house.

The daily queue of the poor who are looking for a few things at the monastery is always larger and larger, and that is another concern that hurts us.

With the confinement, all schools are closed, here, as everywhere else, but the children and young people have to stay home with nothing to do. They have no occupation, except the drudgery of carrying water from

the source and some small household services at home. We have noticed that this has also led to an increase in violence in our village.

Of course, the concern for our future economy has become part of our daily thoughts and concerns. We have no financial resources currently, and during this period, no commercial activity is possible.

The poverty of the country has worsened during the confinement. There is much less money circulating and therefore no chance to sell our products. Besides this, we also foresee a decrease in the foreign gifts that have kept us going thus far, at least in part. In all this we place our confidence in Providence and this keeps us firm and serene, because our life in Congo is already a miracle! It is the miracle of a monastic presence that is laborious yet has not had a source of livelihood assured since its beginning and nevertheless, has never lacked even a few things. The awareness of this precariousness is lucid and very clear, but our faith is even greater, and we ask the Lord every day to make us able to persevere in this trust.