

After repeated invitations from the archbishop of Bukavu, Most Rev. François-Xavier Maroy Rusengo, the Assumptionists recently opened a community in this large eastern Congolese city on the southwestern shores of Lake Kivu, bordering Rwanda and Burundi.

The Assumptionists are not new to the region. In 2001 Assumptionist bishop, Charles Mbogha, was named archbishop of Bukavu, a position he held until his untimely death in 2005, but whose short mandate left an indelible impression on the clergy and lay-people of the archdiocese.

At the beginning of the 20th century the White Fathers (the Missionaries of Africa) opened various communities in this region, parishes, schools, and dispensaries. In 1959, just before independence took place, Pope John XXIII erected Bukavu as one of the six archdioceses of the country. The archdiocese and its institutions have often been the victims of armed conflicts which have troubled the mineral-rich eastern part of the country. Its location next to Rwanda, itself subject to internal tribal divisions (like the 1994 genocide), left the city vulnerable not only to an influx of refugees but all the subsequent problems that arose.

Four Assumptionists (René Mihigo, former assistant general and a native of Bukavu, Antoine Kasereka Muhindo, former treasurer at the house of theology in Kinshasa, Floribert Ngwese, a professor of Biblical studies, and François Nzanzu, a journalist by formation, make up the pioneering community. Archbishop Maroy has proposed any number of apostolic possibilities to them, including a parish, a spiritual center, teaching at the Catholic university, among other things. For the next several months members of the community will familiarize themselves with the archdiocese before making any definitive commitment.

Bukavu is part of the ancient territory of Bushi Kingdom, the main ethnic group of South-Kivu. The first Arabs, then the Europeans arrived in Bushi at the end of the 19th century.The name Bukavu comes from the transformation of the word 'bu 'nkafu ' (farm of cows) in Mashi, the language of Bashi. Bukavu was established in 1901 by the Belgian colonial authorities. Originally named "Costermansville" (in French) or "Costermansstad" (in Dutch) until 1954, it had a prominent European population under colonial rule. They were attracted by the subtropical climate (Lake Kivu is 1,500 metres above sea level) and scenic location (Bukavu is built on five peninsulas and has been described as "a green hand, dipped in the lake"). Many colonial villas have gardens sloping down to the shore.

Bukavu is an important transport hub and gateway to eastern DR Congo, but as a result of the wars the road network has deteriorated and highways to Goma, Kisangani and other towns have not been fully restored.