

From August 4-14,·2017, Assumptionist Fr. Jean-Paul SAGADOU led 70 young people to Ghana to discuss the challenges facing Africa with regard to sociopolitical, economic, and cultural integration and interreligious dialogue. This event took place within the framework of the ongoing "African Integration Trips," a flagship activity of the Réseau de Jeunes pour l'Intégration Africaine (RJIA), or Network of Youth for African Integration, an organization founded in 2012 and officially recognized by the government of Burkina Faso in 2015.

A continent comprised of 70% who are young

For the seventh time, beginning in 2009, Fr. Sagadou with his Assumptionist brothers present in West Africa, took center stage with this huge undertaking. From Burkina Faso to Togo, Ghana, Niger, and Ivory Coast, youth came to participate, youth who make up 70% of the continent's population, considered either as a time bomb ready to explode or as an opportunity to be seized. These youth share similar concerns: unity on the continent and the need to accelerate development at every level, whether in regard to democratic structures, education, or health…

Laboring under deadly ideologies of want

Many young people look on Africa, wrongly, as « a negative place », without a future, without hope. So, how are we to banish this deep-seated sense of a continent without a future, plagued with the inseparable demons of political instability and economic decline --- a picture supported by a certain kind of literature, colonial and neo-colonial, that always describes Africa as having gotten off to a bad start, enigmatic, and poor.

The Assumptionist presence: the origins of an ambitious project

Unable to stand idly by with its arms crossed in the face of these challenges, the Assumptionists present in Burkina Faso and Togo are attempting to give young people the opportunity to express themselves and together to find appropriate solutions to the continent's problems. And if this effort can provide political leaders with helpful ideas for the continent, all the better. In any case this is the modest objective of the RJIA.

Mission accomplished for the seventh edition

The Ghana edition allowed 15 young people from the African diaspora of France and Belgium to join their continental comrades in Ghana to enhance their awareness together that « Africa is a non-territorial-based reality, one whose identity cuts across history and politics. » The young people in attendance were impressed by the quality of the talks given by some of the continent's thinkers like economist and writer, Felwine Sarr, passionate supporters of pan-Africanism like historian Amzat Boukari-Yabara, and philosophers like Yala Kisukidi. In Fr. Jean-Paul's opinion, « Ghana 2017 would have made it possible for African youth to dream new dreams, to develop new hopes, to regain self-confidence and self-esteem without which a sense of meaning in life is impossible. »

Young people speak out

For Lucito Tankoano, a sociologist from Burkina Faso and a specialist in interreligious and intercultural dialogue trained in Morocco, «it was a time when we were able to share, as in a family, the dreams of an Africa united and developed, but also to be convinced that it is not simply a question that Africa is late in developing; above all, it has many challenges to be faced. I was particularly struck at the conference by the Ubuntu ideology whereby we might be able to develop strategies that, through an enterprising spirit, would allow us to explore a situation in order to become aware of the needs of a given public. » The young Senegalese doctor, Omar Sow, was touched by the symbol of Ghana, the land of the builders of pan-Africanism, the land of Kwame N'Krumah, and also by the strong symbol of harmony and of community formed by young people who had come from such diverse backgrounds on this integration trip.

For Siddo Adamou, a humanities teacher from Niamey (Niger), the integration trip is a «

platform allowing for exchanges touching on all the values and sensitivities of the world. The different themes treated allowed participants to explore together some of the burning issues around pan-Africanism. I am a Muslim and at no time did I feel excluded because of my faith tradition. Lots of effort was made to allow us the opportunity to express with the greatest liberty our faith and its different practices», he concluded. For him, if Fr. Sagadou hadn't undertaken this initiative, someone else would have necessarily had to do it.

While awaiting the next edition of the RJIA, young people will be meeting in their respective countries to extend and deepen the conversations that took place during these two weeks.

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