

Pope Benedict XVI focused on Africa again in October, when he presided at the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops. The event was aimed at finding ways Africa could overcome lingering conflicts and seek reconciliation, justice and peace.

The last issue of *L'Assomption et ses oeuvres* (Assumption and its Ministries), an international French quarterly, presented a series of articles on the presence of the Assumption on the African continent. The following article highlights the Assumptionist presence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

The heart of Assumptionist Africa is the Congo, what is now called the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). A former Belgian colony, the ex-Zaire of Mobutu is an immense country (four times the size of France) located along the equator with a population of approximately 60 million inhabitants, of whom 53% are Catholic. The eastern part of the country, on the border with English-speaking East Africa, a region of lofty mountains and vast tropical forests, has been the theater of bloody conflict for the past 15 years. Because of the region's remarkable mineral wealth, which has attracted the envy of neighboring countries and multinational companies, local populations have been living a Calvary that seems endless. It is precisely in this region that the Assumption in Africa was born. Fr. Morand Kleiber, A.A., professor of philosophy, as a result many visits, came to love the people and the land. He shares with our readers his reflections.



It was over 80 years ago that the Assumptionist adventure here began, in 1929, to be precise. The Sacred Heart Fathers were the original missionaries, having arrived in 1906. They

entrusted this eastern section of their territory to us and French, Dutch, and Belgian Assumptionists were the first to accept the invitation to work here. Among the pioneers was Fr. Henri Pierard who was to become the first bishop of the newly erected diocese of Beni-Butembo. From the beginning the objective of these first missionaries was to form a native clergy capable of assuming responsibility for the spread of the gospel. So it was that only in 1980, with the request of the second bishop of the diocese, himself a native Congolese, Most Rev. Emmanuel Kataliko, were the Assumptionists encouraged to begin recruiting native vocations. **Birth of an African Assumption** In 1983 I responded to the call for formators to assist in the training of young native vocations for the Assumption by teaching philosophy at our first house of studies. It was an opportunity for me to discover the rich and diverse face of the Assumption in the Congo: The Oblates of the Assumption and the Orants of the Assumption, to be sure, but also the Sisters of the Presentation and the Brothers of the Assumption, two local congregations sprung from the Assumption. From the Congo the Assumption spread to other parts of Africa, to Kenya, Tanzania, Togo and with plans soon to be in Uganda and Burkina Faso. It is a young province with some 260 religious, mostly Congolese, many of whom, in their turn, have been sent out on mission throughout the world (*editor's note --- including three studying here in the United States*).

Taking up the Baton

At the heart of the Assumptionist presence in Africa is the city of Butembo with its 800,000 inhabitants, nestled in the hills of North Kivu Province along the shores of some of the great lakes of central Africa. It was from this center that the Assumption began to spread to other parts of Africa. The progress in the province is impressive; there are churches, rectories,

schools at all levels (elementary to university), hospitals, orphanages, radio stations, development centers, farms, etc. Many of these institutions had been established by foreign missionaries but today there are less than a handful of them. It is Congolese Assumptionists who have taken up the baton. Not everything is rosy in this region. There is no reliable mail service or electricity; there is a lack of medical supplies; the roads are at times impassable with holes large enough to swallow trucks. These are just a few of the many problems that the inhabitants face and that have left the population poor and, at times, without much hope. For many it has simply been a question of survival, especially over the last 15 years of intractable armed conflict in the area. What is remarkable is that in the midst of such poverty and hardship one can find such resiliency and human qualities.... joie de vivre, a sense of hospitality, sharing, a spirit of initiative and hard work, extraordinary vitality of Christian communities who fill their churches, praying, singing, even dancing to the rhythm of African drums. A stunning Africa, full of life.

No longer able to continue teaching at my age and now back in Europe, I decided to establish a modest fund-raising organization to provide help for the thousands of orphans seeking an education and for many local farmers who have been struggling to feed their families. In 2002 funding was used to open a center for diabetics which today cares for 300 patients a month.

Africa is at the heart of the Assumption, to be sure, but at the center of my heart as well.