

## *Secular Institutes in Africa:* some advice from their own experience

### **A few points in introduction**

- Africa is a large continent, with great diversity; such a diversity exists even within a particular country;
- be aware of important difficulties as far as health issues are concerned;
- unemployment and low income are very frequent;
- injustice and corruption are widespread;
- before welcoming vocations or starting a permanent presence, the local culture has to be well known and accepted;
- one request from a local Church does not always justify the arrival of secular Institute members;
- the permanent benchmark is religious life for everything and everyone, especially for bishops and priests;
- the danger of European-centricity: the Institute will often have to welcome and receive positively the differences in lifestyle and in ways of formation; some adjustments in the practice of the charism might be necessary;
- the family always remains a significant presence.

### **Discernment of vocations**

*Some preliminary conditions:* a minimum and a maximum age are required; the agreement of the family is necessary; if possible, some previous pastoral commitments and some professional experience.

Other points to verify: would joining the institute be a pious way of achieving social promotion, of reaching economic security, of helping one's family, or even of leaving one's country?

And next:

- *a vocation to clarify:* is it a quest for a less demanding religious life, or a second-best option after a failed attempt or a refusal in religious life? Will the person be able to be autonomous, to live as a true lay person and to support oneself in one's own context?
- *the geographic distance with the General/regional Responsibles of the Institute* might be an obstacle for discernment; are a few visits on the spot enough?
- *people already living in the same country* and belonging to other secular institutes or sharing the same spirit are often very helpful;
- *the number of requests might be important*, but cautious discernment is much more important.

## **Training of members**

As much as possible, training has to be undertaken in the very country of the members, in their context – very different from the one of the foundation country -, and adapted to every person and every culture. What is important?

- to highlight positive elements of the member's culture, and to bring out those which need to be purified;
- to underline the dignity of women;
- to promote personal autonomy towards one's family, one's clan and Church authorities;
- to avoid any formation even partly redolent of the religious type;
- to insist on the secularity of this kind of consecrated life;
- to insist on the importance of a personal relation to God, by prayer and liturgy, and teach how to give Him a daily time;
- to plan regular spiritual support;
- brotherhood within the Institute also helps the formation of new members;
- to give the necessary time for a true human and spiritual development, without setting deadlines in advance;
- a precious help can be provided by religious Orders sharing the same spirituality;
- a good understanding of the constitutions and texts about the charism of the Institute might be difficult, because of translation issues;
- there are various means of formation: personal exchanges, @)mail, Skype, regular visits, etc.

## **The members' way of life**

They usually live in their family, sometimes in small groups; it is very difficult for a woman to live alone, except in some cultures and in big cities. Other points of attention:

- no imitation of a religious way of life, even partially;
- to live in one's own place, according to the ways and means of one's people and in the same conditions;
- to keep discretion is often difficult;
- as much as possible, to support oneself without depending on the support of the Institute;
- regular meetings with other members of the Institute are very important, and spiritual retreats too;
- to be committed in activities of the local Church.

### **Exercising authority**

- the authority of the elders of one's family and the strength of local traditions may often remain important;
- to favor authority as a service, with love and simplicity;
- to obey a non-African person is often easier.

### **Exercising poverty**

How is it possible to discuss about poverty with people who daily live it?

Properties and money usually belong to the whole family. At the same time, the family expects the financial support of its member who joined the Institute, and the support of the Institute itself, because solidarity is a strong African virtue.

Never forget this widespread conviction: rich countries can pay and have to pay for poor countries, and provide the members with financial means that in reality often alienate the members from their human and social context.

Poverty may also mean acceptance of one's own social condition.

### **Some other useful suggestions**

- to foster meetings and exchanges between secular Institutes that have members in the same country;
- to create national or regional Conferences of secular Institutes, that might provide some common training for instance;
- to send information out to bishops and priests about our specific vocation, a vocation that is still almost unknown in Africa.