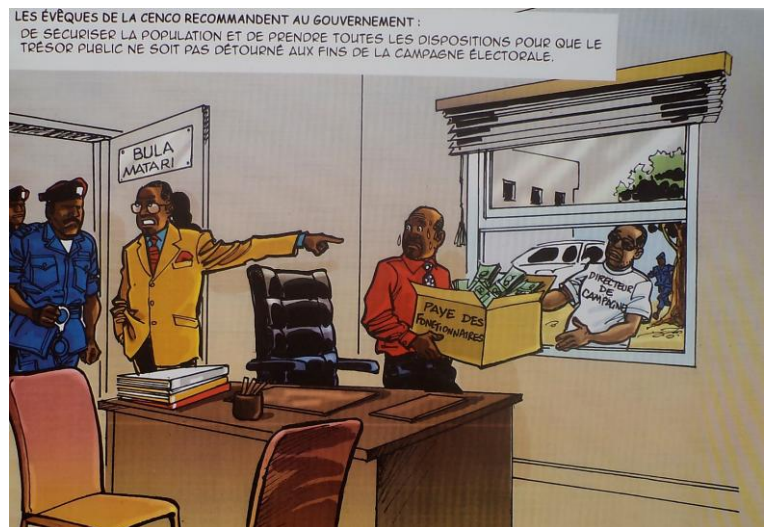


News from the Don Bosco Ngangi Center at Goma

The election

November 28, 2011, was an important day for the Democratic Republic of Congo. About 32 million voters voted to choose the president of the Republic and the 500 deputies to the National Assembly for the next five years. There were 11 candidates for the presidency and almost 19,000 candidates for the National Assembly in the capitol in Kinshasa. The voters had the privilege of voting with the aid of the longest ballot in history, being a syllabus of 56 pages on format A3! Giving that the principle candidates have already been declared winners in advance, if is possible that the losers will not accept easily the verdict of the voting boxes. Many times our bishops invited the Congolese to accept the rules of democracy to the exclusion of all forms of violence, to base the choice of the candidates on their social program and not on the tribe or on the pre-electoral gifts. The Bishop of Goma transformed the eight recommendations of the episcopal Conference in popular sketches which go directly to the goal.

Two examples:



The social crisis

The elections arrive at a moment of profound crisis. According to the Report on human development, 2011, of the United Nations Development Program, the Democratic Republic of Congo is the last classification out of 187 countries analysed. This is an inconceivable scandal, when one thinks of the immense riches of the country. The present governments and the international community carry a great responsibility. Giving that, with these elections, there is no human hope of a radical change of direction, there would be enough to cause a general discouragement and abandonment of the struggle. We shall not do that, mostly because it is during these times that the Church must show its “proximity of compassion” to all those excluded who are here the big majority of the population. The institutions of the Church

(schools, hospitals, work projects...) allow too many people to survive and have hope in a better future. But that is not enough. We make a bet that through the education of the youth, we can, little by little, change the country's outlook and build a basis for a profound transformation of our country.

An attentive observer of the present Congolese situation, pastor Ka Mana, wrote recently, "When one takes into consideration of how Congo is suffering in its gangrenous political situation because of its destructive ethnic identities, there are required actions that impose themselves on us. The first: a high school and university education founded on the analysis of our political pathologies and of their consequences... We must construct a reasonable Congo with good sense by the force of a new human formation that is profound and radical.

Don Bosco bases its educative system on three things: *raison*, religion, affectionate kindness. In a country where the points of reference seem to vacillate, the method of Don Bosco is even more workable and can open to the youth a way to become "honest citizens and good Christians", a very strong force for social transformation.

Everything at school

The Don Bosco Ngangi Youth Center at Goma, where I am, has two principle sectors of activity. The first is the welcome and help to vulnerable people of all sorts: orphans, abandoned children, victims of disasters, refugees... It is our way of participating in the "proximity of compassion." The second is the education, realized especially through the school. At the end of the school year 2010-2011, at Don Bosco Ngangi, there were 64 children in the pre-school, 1212 students, 665 of which were boys and 547 of which were girls, in the primary school. There were 656 students in classes for scholastic remediation (both boys and girls, never or badly taught, accomplishing in three years an elementary course – which is normally six years – and were able to sit for the admission exam for the secondary school, 88 students (66 boys and 22 girls) in the two first years of the secondary school, 318 apprentices (270 boys and 48 girls) in the six sections of the professional school (agriculture, construction, electronics, woodworking, soldering and welding, cutting, and sewing), for a total of 2338 children and youth, boys and girls.

Despite the classes with too many students, and without giving us illusions about the value of the results (the academic level is very low and the exams have been very easy), we can say that we have been the best, or at least the least bad. On the national test for the end of primary school (TENAFEP, admission exam to secondary school), all the students from the Don Bosco Center were accepted. Furthermore, in June 2011, for the first time, a maturity exam at the national level was organized for the finalists of the professional schools who had followed a "short: cycle of 4 years. The apprentices from the Don Bosco Ngangi professional school, because of their more advanced age, due to the different educational delay, were admitted to this exam after only 3 years of study. All were accepted: with astonishment we learned that, in our district they were the best (hear they say: the laureates) in all six sections in which they were tested.



The school for everyone

The Don Bosco Center is perhaps the only school which applies to the letter the slogan of the Congolese government: the school for everyone. It is the second Objective of the Millennium for Development: “assure to everyone a primary education, in order that all children, boys and girls, everywhere in the world, can benefit from 2015 on from a complete cycle of primary studies.” The goal is far off: according to the first results of a research done within the framework of a biannual study 2011-2012 on the situation of children and adolescents not in school, in Congo more than 7 million minors from 5 to 17 years of age are not educated. That is a question of 25% of children of primary school age and 60% of the Congolese adolescents. The main reason for not going to school is especially economic: the State pays the teachers very little (about \$50 per month), the parents of the students must pay a premium (on the average, from 10 to 20 dollars per month, per child) in order to add to the salary given by the State a hundred dollars qui allows the teachers to live. If the parents don’t pay these “costs of exact intervention,” their children are not admitted into the school or they are chased away from it.

The Don Bosco Center has bet on a totally free education (as elsewhere concerning all the other services). In order to regulate the flow of students, our social services has established a scale of vulnerability: admit into our school only the most vulnerable ones, those boys and girls who would have no other possibility of attending another school.

At the beginning of this school year 2011-2012, we have been surprised by the impressive number of vulnerable children who have asked to be enrolled in the first year of primary school. It must be said that, during vacation break, the administration of the school, the social services, the public speaking coordinators, and those responsible for malnourished children have drawn up, to be done automatically, lists of at risk cases. We have looked with urgency, for solutions while trying to exclude no child at all: we have raised the number of students by the class (to 70 and more), added classes which function in the afternoon, raised the number of sign ups to remedial courses... In forcing things a little, we have found a place for everyone, in the respect of total exemption from payment.

This increase which was not asked for but imposed on us by the circumstances, requires increased an economic effort (teacher salaries, school supplies...) The Don Bosco Ngangi Center lives thanks to developmental projects (which don’t assure the salaries of the personal) and thanks to donations. In Europe, many people have underwritten the support at a distance: a monthly donation of 10, 25, 50 euros of more, which guarantees the teaching of many children. I wish to encourage this initiative.

At the school to eat

If the at risk children and youth come to school at Don Bosco voluntarily, it is not only because it is free, but also because we offer to everyone a meal each day. At noon, the big cooking pots in the Don Bosco kitchen prepare polenta and beans for about 3,000 people. We are able to do it thanks to the PAM (World Food Program) which brings into us each month many tons of basic food: corn flour, beans, salt, oil.

But concerning PAM, they have warned us that they will put an end to this aid: they say that we are no longer in an emergency time, that there are other countries (Haiti, Pakistan, Somalia...) that need the food more than us, that the donors have reduced the available funds... Thus the quantity of food that PAM can bring to us is diminishing month by month and it is thought that it will terminate towards the middle of 2012. But we have lots of students who eat only once a day and that is what they get at the Don Bosco Center. During last October, when there was a temporary suspension of the school lunch room, a teacher from the second year primary school brought three little girls to my office. In class they could not stay seated on their benches. They had gone to sleep on the floor because the day before they had nothing to eat. I gave them a little bit of bread and some bananas right away. But I wonder: what will happen if PAM stops its aid for good? The Objective n. 1 of the Millennium for Development proposes: reduce extreme poverty and hunger, reduce by half between 1990 and 2015 the number of individuals suffering from hunger (malnutrition, under-nutrition). We fear that at Ngangi the number of children who don't eat even once a day will go up.



At the Jesus school

The time of Advent that we have just started reminds us that the Savior Jesus came to live with us. He left with us a unique example of proximity of compassion. He had pity on all of our misery. He fed the hungry. He cured the sick. He welcomed the rejected and the marginal ones of the society of his times. He revealed to each one His dignity as the son of God. At His school and with His strength, we try to continue what He has done.

We have the luck to have among us the image of the Child of Bethlehem, multiplied by 54: in effect, the Don Bosco Center welcomes (today) 54 little orphans from 0 to 2 years of age. In

their name, and in the name of all the inhabitants of Ngangi, I thank all those who sustain us through prayer and with economic aid, and I wish them now a Merry Christmas and share love, joy, and peace.

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