

AJANews 89 - February 2010

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Blessed Anuarite Nengapeta is a young Sister of the Holy Family of Kisangani. She worked at Wamba as a teacher. She was murdered resisting the sexual demands of a rebel leader in the Congo in 1964. St Aloysius Gonzaga is a young Jesuit who selflessly gave his life caring for victims of the deadly plague in Rome in 1591. We entrust the African Jesuit AIDS Network to their prayer and protection.

AJAN: NEW ASSOCIATE COORDINATOR

AJAN has an Associate Coordinator, Fr Paterne Mombé SJ, from Central African Republic, who arrived at AJAN House in Kangemi on 2 February 2010. Fr Paterne brings a wealth of experience and expertise to the coordination of AJAN after three years as Director of the *Centre Espérance Loyola* (CEL - Loyola Hope Centre) in Lomé, Togo, a programme of the Jesuit Province of West Africa dedicated to the struggle against AIDS.

As founding director of this pioneer programme, Fr Paterne has in a relatively short time forged the CEL into a dynamic reference point for the care of people with HIV, training and advocacy. However, his involvement in this field stretches further back, as AJAN Coordinator, Fr Michael Czerny SJ, recalls: *Mombé has been participating in AJAN since my arrival in Nairobi in early 2003. I believe he heard my inaugural lecture, A theological research approach to HIV/AIDS in Africa, at Hekima College on 17 January 2003. It would now be interesting for us to re-read that programmatic agenda and reflect on its implementation.*

<http://www.jesuitaids.net/go.aspx?B1=htm/Theoresearch.htm&RZ=1&TL=1>

Since then, Fr Paterne has written *Rays of Hope, Managing HIV&AIDS in Africa* (September 2004, second edition 2008), which provides information about HIV and AIDS, their related diseases and symptoms and how to treat them medically and with nutrition, focusing on the means accessible and affordable for Africans. He was ordained in Bangui in August 2007 before heading for Lomé to start the CEL. With Frs Séverin Mukoko SJ (Central Africa) and Groum Tesfaye SJ (Eastern Africa), he attended the international AIDS Conferences as an AJAN representative, along with two other Jesuits, in Mexico in 2008. *With so much pastoral and social experience in the AIDS field, with such dedication to study and research, in him the Lord showers many gifts upon AJAN and AJAN House,* said Fr Michael.

The CEL bid farewell to Fr Paterne in a simple but moving handover ceremony on 4 January. Fr Bernard Hounnougbo SJ is the new Director of CEL and he knows he has a hard act to follow, listing the *affectionate personality, creative intellect and positive outlook on life* of his predecessor, *still cherished by many in Lomé.*

Generous in their praise of Fr Paterne, the CEL team members all drew attention to the same characteristics: his striving for excellence, unstinting commitment and whole-hearted love for those he serves. Euloge Viho, the first employee of CEL who is in

charge of the accounts, said: *His love for work well done, the special attention he gave all our beneficiaries, his concern to find a solution to all the problems put before him, make Pat a kind-hearted man, sensitive to the suffering and joy of others.* Fr Bernard agrees: *For all of the people living with HIV and AIDS, he was a third parent, going to the extent of spoiling them. Painstakingly he would go all out to discover remedies.* Avelino Chico SJ, a regent at CEL, describes Fr Paterne as a *tireless* man, adding: *Even if someone came on Sunday or a holiday to ask for an HIV test or for assistance, he always did his utmost to help.*

Prince Boroze, another team member, drew attention to Fr Paterne's *boundless availability and generosity, his endurance and capacity to work beyond physical limits, his search for excellence.* The Ignatian spirit of *magis* - excellence - was not something that he kept for himself: *From Pat, I learned how to work hard and give the best of myself for quality work,* said Maxime Palakasi, in charge of the CEL department for formation and research.

Fr Paterne's dedication has borne fruit. *By developing innovative strategies to attain diverse objectives, Paterne has given great scope to the CEL, which has distinguished itself in support for destitute people with HIV; counselling and support groups; formation for those involved in this work; peer education; and different types of awareness,* continued Maxime.

As Fr Bernard takes over the reins of this promising ministry, Fr Paterne is warmly welcome at AJAN House. *Much is offered and promised,* observed Fr Michael, *as we'll collaborate in the coordination, with Ekeno Augustine SJ and Allen Ottaro, with the staff at AJAN House and important associates in the Nairobi area.*

CONGO: I SAW A MIRACLE

Until mid-2009, Ismaël Matambura SJ was the coordinator of Parlons-SIDA (Let's Talk about AIDS), a care and prevention programme in the Jesuit parish of Christ the King in Kisangani in DRC. His experience taught him that compassionate care for people with HIV who have been rejected can work miracles.

When I met Viala [not her real name], she weighed some 40 kilos. She was paper thin, could barely walk and was suffering from tuberculosis (TB). Her family had given her up for dead. Viala's plight was by no means unusual: people afflicted by disease often experience rejection, discrimination and solitude. This can arise from many factors: the fatigue of relatives; the steep cost of healthcare; the fear of infection especially in cases of HIV; the grind of tending to those whose physical strength has been completely sapped by sickness.

The stigma persists, as HIV continues to recruit victims at an alarming rate, despite awareness campaigns by governments, non-governmental organisations and others involved in the struggle. It is not surprising that people with HIV who are treated such become weary of life and discouraged because their dignity and humanity is denied them.

I remember especially Viala, another woman and a man, all living with AIDS, rejected by their families and looked after by children. By chance, they heard that Parlons-SIDA took care of people with HIV and showed up to ask for help. When each came in for the

first time, I could scarcely believe that it was an adult who was facing me: their skin barely stretched over their bones and they were extremely weak. I welcomed them warmly, listened, encouraged and reassured. Before referring them to hospital for urgent tests, I reminded them that *God never forsakes those who depend on Him*.

This first encounter was enough to start making a difference: you could see how merely being welcomed and listened to, made our three friends feel that their denied humanity was being restored. After tests were carried out, I assured them that they would have the medicines they needed as well as nutritional support. After a week, signs of hope emerged. Put on treatment for TB, Viala was discharged from hospital five months later, weighing 55 kilos. This was a great joy for her because she had despaired of ever returning home. The others look very well too.

The Parlons-SIDA team follow Viala and the others closely, with counselling, home visits, affection and sustained attention to their problems. A visibly-moved Viala told me in Lingala before I left Kisangani: *Sango, soki Parlons-SIDA te, mbele mbele nazali na se ya mabele! Natondi bino botondi po na manso. Père obosana ngai na losambo te*. Without the intervention of Parlons-SIDA, I would be already dead and buried! Thank you very much. And one last thing, Father, wherever you go, don't forget me in your prayers. The glory of God has manifested itself in my life. I have understood and am convinced that God loves me.

AIDS continues to pose a challenge to the worlds of faith and of science. In this scenario, respectful compassion and listening remain a highly effective means of "resurrection", a remedy that restores life just as Jesus did to Lazarus. Needless to say, pharmaceutical products and regular nutrition, among other things, are also necessary.

Our Lord Jesus identified with the most vulnerable. All believers are called to seek out such people, in other words, to take care of the Body of Christ afflicted by AIDS. *Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me* (Mk 9:37).

KENYA: COME & SEE

In August 2009, 105 young people from 12 countries gathered in Kenya for the MAGIS programme. This is based on Ignatian spirituality and centres on the "experiment" undertaken by the participants: an encounter with the poor and a work of service. MAGIS'09 organised five experiments, including one in Kangemi, where participants visited Upendo Unit, a project for neglected children run by the Jesuit parish of St Joseph the Worker, and AJAN House. Harris Tombi SJ, a scholastic from Cameroon who has been involved in the struggle against the pandemic for years, joined another group that went upcountry to Nyahururu in Rift Valley Province. He writes:

My group consisted of 23 youth from Australia, Cameroon, Germany, Kenya, Mauritius, Poland and Tanzania. When we shared our expectations of the experiment, a clear desire emerged, namely, to meet - the majority for the first time - a person living with HIV. This eagerness was voiced by those coming from Europe as well as from Africa, including the Kenyans. It was prompted not by curiosity, akin to the thrill of seeing lions at the zoo, but rather by the desire for presence, relationship, love and real sharing of life. Some asked whether people with HIV were like everyone else. Could they be singled out at first glance? Did they bear signs showing they were positive?

How might we touch them, or better not? Could we pick the children up?

In Nyahururu, we were introduced to the St Martin social apostolate of the Diocese and heard about its many projects, including the *Talita Kum* centre, which houses some 60 AIDS orphans, mostly aged around 10 ("Talita kum" is what Jesus said to the 12-year-old girl who had died, Mk 5:41). Our visit to the centre was a moving experience. At first, the MAGIS pilgrims' faces betrayed a trace of fear. Waiting for us, the orphans burst into a welcome song when we arrived. Then each one took a pilgrim by the hand to guide them on a tour of the premises. This simple gesture broke the ice. The entire afternoon was spent in fun and games: running, playing with skipping ropes, tap dancing. The young people tried so hard to communicate with the children, who can speak only Swahili!

Clearly the pilgrims were surprised to find children who were just like any others. None of them looked sick, benefiting as they do from the quality of care - medical, nutritional, psychosocial, spiritual and educational - that makes for positive living. What the pilgrims saw was totally different from what they had often heard or read about and what they had imagined. They met youngsters who like anyone else needed to be loved, listened to and cared for.

The children really stole the hearts of the pilgrims, who could hardly bring themselves to leave the fragile beings burdened daily by the weight of a disease whose consequences they are as yet ignorant of. Doubtless it was the children's spontaneous love, their smiles, their outstretched hands, their friendly and peaceful gaze that transformed their guests' mistaken ideas about people with HIV. Their freely-given love brought tears to our eyes, love that we took back with us, to remember these children and their hope to live well, as long as sustained medical and other care and the grace of God allow.

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