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Pan African religious gathering opens in Uganda

Thomas C. Fox | Feb. 4, 2012

Shrine of the Ugandan martyrs (Photo by Tom Fox)

NAMUGONDO, UGANDA ? For only the second time in the relatively young African church history, the leadership of men and women religious from throughout the continent and Madagascar came together here Feb. 4 at the outset of a weeklong conference aimed at promoting understanding and communication while looking at ways to collaborate on the pressing ecclesial and social issues they face.

Fifty-seven delegates representing 22 national conferences of religious are in Uganda having come for the second general assembly of the Confederation of Conferences of Major Superiors of Africa and Madagascar, or COMSAM, formed in 2005. The only previous COMSAM meeting was in 2009 in Cameroon.

There are 41 nations with Catholic religious conferences on the African continent. However, meager resources, communication difficulties, and political turmoil keep some from traveling and attending international gatherings.

The first day of the COMSAM gathering, held at the revered minor basilica and shrine of the Ugandan martyrs, ten miles east of Kampala, the capital city, was both solemn and festive. It stretched from 7:30 in the morning until 1:30 in the afternoon, a ceremony that combined adoration of the Eucharist, silent meditation, rich African song and dance, speeches, and a high mass celebrated by Prefect of the Vatican Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, Cardinal-elect Archbishop João Bráz de Aviz.

Bráz de Aviz asked the gathered religious who packed the shrine to renew their vows before God on the spot where 126 years ago 13 of 24 canonized Ugandan martyrs were burned to death on piles constructed after they were forced to carry the wood to their own martyrdom. The martyrs, beatified in 1920 by Pope Benedict XV and canonized by Pope Paul VI in 1964, are highly revered here. The shrine, in the form of a large circular

In his remarks to the gathered religious, Bráz de Aviz, his open face smiling widely, encouraged them to live out their faith lives in the spirit of love and community. ?God is love; God is communion,? the prelate said, stressing the need for the religious of Africa to be continuously open to dialogue among themselves, with their bishops, and with the other religions and cultures of Africa. He spoke of rapidly changing cultures and the need for the church to be in dialogue with these cultures.

The Brazilian prelate, in his address, focused on the Trinity as the primary example of Christian communion. He said church members cannot afford not to be in union with one another. He also stressed the need for reconciliation, which, he noted, was one of the principle themes that came out of the 2009 Synod for Africa. ?Remember this,? he said, speaking through an interpreter in his native Portuguese. ?We are not called to judge. We are called to love everyone.?

Also representing the Vatican during the opening ceremony was the Apostolic Nuncio, South Korea Archbishop Paul Tschang In-nam. Archbishop of Kampala Cyprian Kizito Lwanga was overseas and could not attend the ceremony.

COMSAM President Our Lady of Good Counsel Sister Romina Nyemera delivered a welcoming address to the assembly [2], offering warm Ugandan hospitality.

"All religious men and women who have come from various communities near and far to celebrate our consecrated life," she said. "To you all I say, 'Rejoice highly favored!'"

According to church officials here, there are 24 Catholic Uganda Martyrs. Twenty-two were killed between 1885 and 1887 by King Mwanga of Buganda in the south of Uganda; thirteen of these were burnt to death at here at Namugongo. The twenty-two were beatified by Pope Benedict XV in1920 and canonized by Pope Paul VI in 1964. The other two martyrs were speared to death in northern Uganda in 1918. They were beatified by Pope John Paul II in 2002.

Two Anglicans also died during those years for refusing to denounce their religion. In his remarks, Bráz de Aviz noted that Christians should not forget those two martyrs.

The martyrs are honored here each year on June 3.

[Tom Fox is *NCR*'s publisher.]

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