First Colloquium of African and European Theologians,
A Personal Witness

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The Ecumenical Association of African Theologians, under the strong and wise leadership of its executive secretary, Father Engelbert Mveng SJ, of the University of Yaounde, invited its members and a number of European theologians for an encounter in Yaounde in order to exchange views on the broad theme The Mission of the Church Today. Twenty Europeans and one Canadian (from the staff of the World Council of Churches) were privileged to attend the meeting and to dialogue with about sixty African theologians and/or intellectuals mainly from Cameroon; not all of them were actual members of the Ecumenical Association of African Theologians. It is a pity that the possibility for theologians still outside this Association to attend the conference was not clear before the meeting; as a matter of fact it was not clear to the teachers and advanced students of the Faculty of Protestant Theology in Yaounde and it was completely unknown to the team of excellent theologians of the Evangelical Theological College at Ndongué, Cameroon. This means that competent voices from the non-Catholic African Churches were not heard in the full range of theological positions. The focus of the meeting was rather the intercontinental dialogue between African and European theologians than the ecumenical dialogue between Roman Catholic and other theologians which was also intended. Again, it is completely right that the Ecumenical Association of African Theologians arrange a meeting of its own members with a number of foreign guests selected among the sympathizers of African Theology in Europe. Furthermore, it is a guarantee of success for a meeting when all participants share a certain common understanding and know each other to some extent.

A closed meeting?

My personal impression of the whole meeting was a feeling of closeness. And indeed it became a real closed meeting on the 6th of April, when a short but heavy civil war broke out in Yaounde. Every communication with the outside world was cut and nobody took the risk of walking out of the city of Yaounde up to the Mount Febe, where the meeting took place, in the splendid Benedictine monastery. Until the end of the session, our dialogue was punctuated by the sound of machine guns and the explosions of bombs. Finally we heard that the rebellion had been crushed within two days, but the atmosphere remained tense even to this day when I am writing this personal report. I shall try to explain why - even besides the political and military circumstances - the meeting was a rather closed one, prepared in a certain air of secrecy. As a matter of fact, Father E. Mveng disclosed to us in his word of welcome that he was aware of a kind of conspiracy.
of ecclesiastical hierarchies to sabotage the meeting, which was originally scheduled for 1983 at the University of Graz, Austria. For my part, I can believe that Church executives have reasons to distrust the Association of African Theologians: Roman Catholics are not very happy that (Roman) Catholicity is been questioned and accused of suppressing legitimate particularities; Protestants feel that internal Roman Catholic difficulties are occupying the whole field of discussion in the Association.

There are other sides of the picture. One is the strong personality of Father Mveng, who is doing many things almost alone, in various areas of life, and he must create time for himself in order to manage the Association next to his multiple responsibilities e.g. historical research at the University of Yaounde, development of African art and craft in a particular work place, management of a private secondary school of 800 pupils, co-leadership of a new congregation of sisters, the Community of the Beatitudes, and efforts to build a house for it. Another factor is a structural difficulty of communication within Cameroon and perhaps Africa generally at this time. It is not sure that letters will reach their addressees at all or reach them in time. It is almost impossible to get telephone calls within Cameroon. Airline schedules are too often unreliable. It is no wonder that organization leaves much to be desired and that improvisation plays a big role. Indeed I am full of admiration before the smooth running of our meeting in spite of all difficulties.

Themes and sub-themes

The general theme of the encounter was The Mission of the Church Today, as I have already indicated. According to the letter of invitation, the aim of the meeting was "to investigate theological bases for the solidarity between poor and rich Churches in their common mission of evangelizing the world, considering the challenges of the modern world to the mission of the Church". This broad theme was addressed in two ways. Firstly, we had to hear twenty four plenary presentations in full speed (the champion was a paper of 49 pages presented in half an hour; another paper of 47 pages was presented in 25 minutes). Secondly, we had the opportunity to meet and discuss in three workshops on the following sub-themes: 1) Liberation theology and mission theology; 2) The Church of the poor: Poverty and mission; 3) Dialogue and solidarity structures between African and European theologians and Churches. A good summary of our discussions is given by the general report prepared by Father Jean-Marc Ela and Dr. Stuart Brown and accepted by the plenary, and also by the three reports of the workshops with their recommendations. I shall limit myself to a personal evaluation of a few central issues.