



If you only knew the Gift of God

Thomas Théophile Nug Bissohong



Thomas Théophile Nug Bissohong

The 2015 CLC-France Assembly and me

I have decided to make a solemn celebration of my baptism into the Roman Catholic Church for a whole year starting on 27th February last year until 27 February 2016. Among the sources of inspiration that have fashioned me are the provisions and promises from God as set out in this text: “This fiftieth year shall be for you a jubilee year [...] The jubilee will be holy for you [...] Each one of you will return to your heritage” (Lv25, 11- 13). Halfway through my journey of thanksgiving to the Lord for the gift of his life received in Christ, one of the blessings that I was able to enjoy greatly is my participation in the National Assembly of CLC-France, a gathering of nearly 2,700 people, held from July 31 to August 2, 2015 in the city of Cergy-Pontoise.

The theme proposed by the organizing team was “Come to the well of encounter” recalling the Gospel scene where Jesus, a Jew, converses at length with a Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob (Jn 4: 1-42).

With the benefit of hindsight, in the light of the conference theme and my life experience it seems clear to me that my acceptance of the invitation to participate in this Assembly has confirmed my faith in this way: our human wish to encounter God and others drives us to trust his Beloved Son, who is “the Way” (Jn 14: 6). Jesus has in-

deed led my extended stay in France, throughout the month of August 2015, to a crossroads of the most unlikely interpersonal encounters, both providential and richly life-giving.

Everything points to the fact that they were destined, in this time of the Golden Jubilee of my baptism to lead me to revisit my Christian commitment and to nourish it with a special momentum of Gospel-inspired openness allowing myself to be loved more, so that in my turn, I love more and in an authentic fashion.

So I want to give witness that the grace-filled acts and the various people encountered have collaborated in the work of God who has provided for me, in this year 2015, an especially rewarding apostolic stay in this country “the eldest daughter of the Church”.

Sharing life

During the Assembly, I was impressively struck by the personal warmth and spiritual zeal of all participants I came in contact with. Meeting several of our colleagues from France and elsewhere in the world, it was a time of reunion bringing back memories of one or other of the four CLC World Assemblies that I had the grace to participate in: Hong Kong, China (1994), Itaici, Brazil (1998), Nairobi, Kenya (2003), and

View of the Congress



Beirut, Lebanon (2013). Further encounters with memories and catching up of CLC and / or Ignatian meetings at national or international level which I animated in Douala and Yaoundé, Cameroon (1993, 1997, 2011), Bouaké and Abidjan in Ivory Coast (1996, 2009), Harare, Zimbabwe (2001), in Antananarivo Madagascar (2003), Debra Zeit, Ethiopia (2007), Rome, Italy (2009), Lubumbashi Democratic Republic of Congo (2010) etc. This renewed immersion in the global dimension of our community that the Assembly made possible by bringing together colleagues from long time ago and from various continents, internally confirmed my call to live the universality of my baptism during the Jubilee celebration.

With other new friends discovered in Cergy-Pontoise, we were all invited, individually and collectively, to “travel with Jesus in the trail of the Samaritan woman,” as at the wells of the Gospel. This spiritual exercise involving the going out of oneself towards the Stranger, the Unknown, the Other or the Different, consisted here in “bearing witness to what we live, to welcome the testimony of our colleagues and friends, to experience together an encounter with men and women committed to serving others, with great witnesses, with the local Church”. In the context of the local community of the Assembly (CLC) which I experienced, I was able also to listen to the sharing about all practical aspects of the life of the people. The truth, the depth and the strength of Apostolic questioning of what was said, with ease and simplicity, have aroused in me a very particular admiration. I understood that we were benefitting from the fruits of a carefully planned spiritual and communal preparation. It is the same atmosphere— one at the same time serious, friendly and relaxing— I found with other members of my “well”. It was precisely one of the planned spaces to “experience an encounter of participants of the Assembly and representatives of local life or members of an association, to experience a different reality from ours “ so as to “re-position our bearings, to question our prejudices.” I continue to savour the example that I saw here of two French CLC members involved with other people of different nationalities and religions, in the creation and promotion of a co-operative restaurant in Montpellier. We were very touched by the way they described the project and the aim pursued: joint action for more solidarity in creating more employment and support and to fight against isola-

tion. They managed to make us understand the steps and contents of their initial and daily discernment, questioning and enriching our own daily affairs.

Both in the “wells” as in the Hub of the Local community’s for the Assembly, the encounter meeting between myself and others took place in the midst of a living and surprising Christ, when I dared to share aspects of my celebration of the anniversary of my baptism. As I had done in my first families and my community in the Church of Cameroon, I had to welcome and manage the increasing expressions of astonishment, curiosity, among my listeners. The reactions were the same when I asked them to pray with me for my country victim of numerous suicide bombings by the Islamist group Boko Haram, building on the text of the Act of Consecration of Cameroon to Mary Queen of Apostles, text inherited from 125 years ago from the very first Catholic missionaries, German Pallotine fathers.

I was so pleasantly surprised when some CLC members from France accepted my prayer request and their recall of the dramatic events and killings that took place in early 2015 at the premises of the magazine Charlie Hebdo. They too rediscovered and reflectively recalled the official edict published in February 1638 and by which King Louis XIII also consecrated their country to the Blessed Virgin Mary. In the context of the fidelity to our common mission in our two respective countries, as in others where CLC is established today, we finally realised the truth of these remarks that the President of our World Executive Council, Mauricio Lopez, spoke in Cergy-Pontoise:

“We must urgently put the tools of Ignatian spirituality at the service of the world and

Thomas Nug (seated, left) and members of his "Well" during the Congress



take them to the ultimate limits, because, faced with the signs of the times of the present, their timeliness and relevance is unique. This implies that we need to go to new mission destinations without abandoning those important ones [we already have] “

In this regard, the testimony of those who with or without their spouse, form the Network of Deacons for Ignatian Spirituality in France (RDI) who, by the way, had a stand at the Assembly venue, seemed to me to have an exemplary apostolic value. Across the country, CLC members who are Permanent Deacons show clearly and significantly “the presence of the church in everyday life, side by side with lay people baptized or not, for the service of men and women of our time and especially the poorest”. I am profoundly convinced that the Ministry of CLC-Deacon, which I have discovered with joy, has today the potential to inspire and provide an effective basis for the social and political commitment of our communities in Africa and elsewhere.

From top to bottom
Alwin Macalalad, Executive
Secretary of World CLC,
Analucia Torres and Thomas
Théophile Nug;
Nug Thomas at the
Congress with Mr. and Ms
Diego (CLC France),
Adelaide and Denis Talom
Tchuente (CLC Cameroon),

The aggiornamento of the terms of the Apostolic alliance

Following the Assembly and in its aftermath, it is at the well of an eight-day retreat

that the Lord desired to meet me and talk to me during my trip to France. Naturally, in the context of my celebration of the Jubilee, my initial desire for my retreat was to search and find out how, today, I can better live, especially as a baptized person, the reality of my personal vocation in the Church and in Society.

The gospel contemplations gradually sent me back to my baptismal vocation to follow Christ and be with him, “Priest, Prophet and King”. I then felt a strong inner call to open up radically to the priestly dimension of my being a child of God, and to the more ardent realization of the prophetic and royal dimensions. This experience opened for me the memory, the understanding and feeling for the link that exists between the baptismal commitment and Eucharistic life, such as Xaviere Marie-Anne Aitken and the Jesuit Thierry Lamboley express it: “At the heart of your weaknesses and your limits, make of your life an offering to God and to others. Keep repeating a simple yes to life. That will give you confidence in yourself beyond the doubts that may assail you. That will give you confidence in others who accompany you on your way!” (To better live the Mass, Paris, Editions SER, 2015, p.72). The smart response, it occurred to me, ought to be to readjust aspects of my life of prayer and my attitude to the authority of service, whether I exercise it or when it is ministered to me.

For the rest of my stay, I had the opportunity to conduct activities that guided me to overcoming the weaknesses and limitations in the history of my baptism and that the retreat had brought back to mind. I realized more clearly, and as I had not done so previously, that the attention I am used to giving to the sick undoubtedly comes from the awareness of six months’ premature birth and in the accompanying suffering: a condition that necessitated my urgent baptism at the hospital by a religious sister who was a member of the medical team on the same day when I came into the world.

The Spiritual Exercises, always make me susceptible to remembering the dead. I am convinced that the death of my mother at my birth, that of my twin brother 40 days later and the context of the annual prolonged face-to-face with the Lord have the effect to refresh in me, in a certain way, the inclination to believe that my survival and my apostolic life carry in them, the requirement of a holy remembrance of the loved



ones who have made it before me to the house of the Father. My desire to honor the memory of our deceased manifested itself differently after my retreat. First in the southwest of France, at Cahors, where a young and long-standing friend and Cameroonian CLC friend died peacefully. His younger sister whom I met during the Assembly, herself a CLC member, led me to the place where our brother is buried and we took comfort in praying together near his grave. In the house of the Holy Ghost Fathers in Chevilly-Larue where I stayed for a few days thanks to an introduction by a priest from Douala, I consulted the archives in particular for a publication on the life and work of the first known Catholic Cameroonian, Johann Ludwig Andreas Maria Kwa Mbangue, baptized January 6, 1889 in Germany and who died in Douala on August 16, 1932. I was not loath to take the opportunity, at the time of the celebration of the “Centenary of the Holy Ghost Fathers’ Mission in Cameroon” to go to the corner of the cemetery and take some moments of reflection at the graves of many missionaries of the congregation who have worked among us.

Finally, after I was accompanied to Paris Montparnasse cemetery to pray to God at the grave of the French Jesuit Eric de Rosny, I also, with and at the home of one of his relatives, initiated a conversation around his life and work. CLC Members, the colleagues from the University of Douala staying in Paris, some nuns from the Community of Xavières and other interested in the subject actively took part in that conversation. My need to remember him, who in his adopted country of Cameroon took the name of Dibunjé, is largely due to the fact that for several years I had worked closely and effectively with him. He was Ecclesiastical Assistant for CLC-Cameroon as well as a specialist in anthropology of African Health and member of the Ignatian group of Yaounde where together and frequently we guided spiritual retreats.

Overall, therefore, before, during and after the Assembly of Cergy-Pontoise, within all the events and encounters, here and there in France, I felt confirmed in a particular vocation of the Church. It is a call of living out for myself and for others, the charisma of the Baptismal gifts that CLC promotes, in particular, to help to find God in all things and to bear witness to His fidelity for all time: the listening, the discernment and the



View of the Congress

review. I derive my crucial principles in this context generally but also, together with appropriate training, from the way in which others have variously identified and / or accompanied my weaknesses and my limitations as a child, a teenager or an adult. In this context, it seems undeniable that my re-discovery of the pedagogy of the Mother of God, as highlighted during this year in the two days I spent in Lourdes will remain for me an important point of my spiritual renewal. Guided meditations made this pilgrim return to Douala, with these thoughts:

“Mary [...] does not focus the attention of Bernadette on to her, as she continuously invites her [the girl] to enter inside the Grotto, where she points her to the source, that is to say towards Christ [...] Mary will lead Bernadette to the maturity of her Christian life, her [personal] vocation. It is in this way that from a religion of rites and rules, the young girl will come to meet a person [...] Mary, the Mother of the Savior who communicates with another lay person: Bernadette. Bernadette delivers the message, first to lay people, most of whom are women [...] This is the way, we receive this testimony, a treasure which is our heritage.” (Extract from the Pastoral Theme of Lourdes 2015: The Joy of the Mission).

For the celebration of the anniversary of my baptism and together with all other joys of the journey and stay, these words are already, in my eyes, an imperishable and beautiful gift: it will always be both evangelically and mercifully explosive in the context of the prevailing clericalism!

*Original in French
Translated by Patricia Kane*