

IV Assembly of the Comboni Lay Missionaries in Africa Cotonou 2022

The representatives of the Comboni Lay Missionaries (CLMs) of Africa – Chad, Congo, Egypt, Kenya, Togo-Ghana-Benin, Uganda –, accompanied by two members of the Central Committee, met in their fourth continental assembly from 3 to 11 December 2022 in Cotonou, Benin.

We experienced our assembly as an awakening of our mission as CLMs, a privileged time to seek and find solutions to our common problems and challenges.

The meeting was a moment of profound harmony, experienced within the surprising diversity of the members present. Great was everyone's commitment to contribute their best, referring to our common history, starting from the proposals that emerged at the Layibi Assembly in 2011 to those of the Rome Assembly in 2018.

Our participation was felt by all as a clear sign of the growth of CLMs in different countries. New countries were represented by new members. We thank God for these new vocations and for the hope they represent. We know, however, that we are still very few in number and that there is still much to be done to carry out the mission that the Lord has entrusted to us. But the desire to grow was felt in everyone.

Arriving here, we thought we would have to produce documents and resolutions to help us orient our groups, to move forward together towards our common mission, but we discovered that there is already a wealth of contents and decisions in the many documents we already have. Therefore, we encourage all our members to study them and put them into practice (starting with the conclusions decided at the Rome Assembly in 2018), so that they help and guide us towards our common mission.

We believe in the synodality of our family, which is expressed through our co-responsibility and helps us achieve greater communion. Our realities are different, but we share common goals.

At this assembly, we discussed in depth the many challenges we face as members of the CLM international movement. We want to address these challenges systematically, through clear steps and concrete proposals that will enable us to achieve all that we are called to.

We really believe that the first step is to study our international documents (especially the 2018 Rome Agreements). We therefore want to set specific times to revisit and study them within our groups (one topic at a time) to see what specific adjustments we can make to implement them in our groups.

As a family in which everyone takes care of each other, we would like to awaken our desire to know what is happening in other groups, as well as increase our willingness to learn new languages, as an indispensable means to be able to communicate and interact among us.

During our assembly we reflected a lot on our missionary commitments. We do believe that we must put our vocation at the centre of our lives, to respond faithfully to the vocation with which the Lord is calling us to missionary service in and outside our countries of origin – a service that comes from our common vocation as CLMs and we hope that we can express it with a concrete community presence in each country. However, in order to make it possible, we know that we should consider our CLM family the same way as we consider our biological family, that is, caring for it and committing ourselves together to serve the mission.

As for sending our members out of their own countries, we know that this poses a considerable economic challenge. With this in mind, we propose that each group include in its annual budget a percentage of its income to be set aside to support a member working in a mission abroad. The sending group should also set aside a certain amount of money to support a member returning from the mission abroad, to help him/her with food and accommodation for a certain period, thus facilitating his/her reintegration back home.

During this week, we have been reflecting on the need for all of us, as members of the CLM, to live a clear and correct sacramental life, and how the traditional marriage of some ethnic groups – as well as other similar issues – can easily interfere with this important aspect of our witness. In this sense, we feel it is our duty to encourage all our groups to reflect on this important point in our Christian life, and to try to help our members in this regard. We, as lay Christians committed to the Church, should contribute to this important process of inculturation of the Gospel in our own cultures.

We have also noted that there are cases where only one member of a married couple is CLM. This is an important and delicate aspect that we should take into consideration during the discernment process. We should therefore invite the couple themselves to carry out a vocational discernment together, to see whether they both share the vocation of CLM, or only one of them, and to study how this vocation can be lived out within their family.

Regarding formation (training), we have discovered the surprising richness contained in the new *CLM International Guide*. We therefore encourage all our groups to review and update their training plans according to it.

Another happy discovery was the *International CLM Communication Plan*. Enthusiastically adopting this guide, we propose that each group draw up its own communication plan (every one or two years), clearly defining specific tasks, so that we can have a systematic approach to our communication. We also decided to create a *Communication Commission in Africa*, composed of the communication secretaries of our national groups.

One of the most challenging topics we discussed was the issue of *financial autonomy*. In this respect, we want to improve our formation-training – from being able to respond to the most immediate needs to being able to plan future development projects correctly and thoroughly – so that we have a common accountability system and are able to properly present development projects and then follow their implementation.

We certainly did not forget to also discuss our commitment at the international level. Therefore, we invite each group to decide what percentage of its income – and how often – it is willing to send as a contribution to the CLM International Common Fund, managed by the Central Committee.

Having rediscovered the breadth and responsibility of our vocation as CLMs, and aware of the large number of commitments and needs we have to cover, we suggest a serious reflection on how to organise our groups, especially in terms of time to devote to our meetings, in order to seek and find ways to fulfil all the commitments we have as CLMs.

We say an enthusiastic ‘YES’ to the requests that the Lord makes to us as African CLMs, members of the CLM International Movement, and in full communion with the entire Comboni Family and the whole Church.

Cotonou, December 11th 2022.

Third Sunday of Advent (“*Gaudete*” Sunday) and CLM Day