



*Il Superiore Generale*  
*Superior General*

## **Message of the General Superior after the Fraternal Visit to the Camillian Delegation in Uganda**

*15-19 April 2016*

*There is a place where Christ's light shone in your land with a particular splendour.  
This was the place of darkness. Namugongo, where Christ's light shone bright in the great fire  
which consumed Saint Charles Lwanga and his companions.  
May the light of the holocaust never cease to shine in Africa!*

*Saint Pope John Paul II – 7 February, 1993  
During his visit in Uganda, at Namugongo*

*Their faith (Ugandan Martyrs) became witness; today, venerated as martyrs, their example continues to inspire  
people throughout the world. They continue to proclaim Jesus Christ and the power of his Cross... Like the Apostles  
and the Uganda martyrs before us, we have received the gift of the Holy Spirit to become missionary disciples called  
to go forth and bring the Gospel to all. At times this may take us to the end of the earth, as missionaries to faraway  
lands.*

*Pope Francis in Uganda – 28 November 2015  
Homily during celebration of the Holy Mass for Ugandan Martyrs in Namugongo*

**Dear Fr. Johnson Vellachira Varghese, MI**

*Delegate Superior and Rector of the Saint Camillus Seminary*

**Dear Fr. Steven Foster, MI**

*Provincial of the Anglo-Irish Province*

**Dear religious brothers Fr. Jofree Devassia, MI and Fr. Richard Lubbale, MI**

***Health and peace in our living God!***

As Superior General, I, Fr. Leocir Pessini, together with Fr. Laurent Zoungwana, the Vicar General, visited your Delegation on 15-19 April 2016. During our visit, Fr. Steve Foster, the Provincial of the Anglo-Irish Province, came from Ireland (Dublin) and stayed with us during the whole of our time with you.

Being in this new Camillian mission in Uganda for the first time, it was very important for both of us to learn about the history of this mission which was narrated to us in detail at the first community meeting with all the religious.

This Camillian community is made up of three religious. There has also been the valuable cooperation for two years of a diocesan priest from India, from the diocese of Mananthavady, Fr. Augustine Thanniyil, who is the spiritual director for the seminarians.

In terms of vocations, we have 8 seminarians at the St. Camillus Seminary (Kimala, Jinja), a beautiful building which has been recently completed, 3 in the orientation year, and 7 studying philosophy in Jinja. During the days of our presence amongst you there were 4 potential vocations, young men who were engaging in the experience of the two-week project 'Come and See'.

In the novitiate there are 2 Ugandans in Karungu (Kenya) and they are in the novitiate with the other 4 novices from the Kenya Delegation. In Morogoro City, Tanzania, there are another 3 studying theology. So it was good to hear the Provincial say: "we have a lot of confidence about the future. We privilege quality not quantity".

During our talks and meetings, we talked extensively about pastoral care for vocations, the process of formation and the possibility of cooperation between Camillians from East Africa (the English-speaking countries), especially Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya.

The General Consultor of the Order, Fr. Zoungrana, mentioned the need to have a coordinator for pastoral care for vocations and formation for these three neighbouring countries. We were reminded that you are still at 'an embryonic stage' and have some special needs at the present time. Some time will still be needed in order to achieve this. But it is important not to lose sight of the fact – while walking towards the future – that cooperation is fundamental. As happened in the recent past, there is cooperation between Camillians in the field of formation. We recommend that you walk in this direction and encourage you to do so. Living in an isolated way, being few in number, we will simply not have a future. United we can do better. We have to draw up a common programme shared with all the parties involved, with what is essential for each one of the stages of formation, as well as taking into account the values of different cultural traditions, which, indeed, always play an important role.

In this sense, the next world meeting of the Order with all the promoters of vocations and people responsible for providing formation, which is planned for 2017, has as one of its main objectives the updating of the manual on formation of the Order. This could be an important source of inspiration for your process of formation in Uganda and neighbouring countries.

During our meetings with the community, we had an opportunity to update you on the Order, mainly as regards the implementation of the Camillian Project for the Revitalisation of Camillian Consecrated Life. It has three priorities for this six-year period (2014-2020) of our term of office: a) *organising the economics of the Order, mainly at the generalate house; b) the promotion of vocations and (initial and ongoing) formation; and c) communication.* We also commented on, and discussed, the happy moment that we are living through in the ecclesial world with the leadership of Pope Francis, the promulgation of 2015 as the Year of Consecrated Life, and now the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy (2015-2016). For we Camillians, who are inspired by Saint Camillus and whose 'charism of mercy' has been confirmed by the Church, this is an exceptional opportunity for all of us to grow in spirituality and our ministry through Samaritan action of creative compassion in the health-care field, responding to the challenges that this world poses to us today.

With respect to the Year of Consecrated Life (2015), there is an important point in the letter that Pope Francis wrote to all the consecrated people of the world. The Pope reminded us of our historical identity, an identity that we can never forget. He said that we religious do not only have a glorious history to remember and to recount to those that do not know about it – we also have a great history to construct together. Looking to the *past we need to cultivate an attitude of gratitude, while living the present with passion (and as Camillians serving with Samaritan compassion) and embracing the future with hope.*

It is within this framework of thinking that I would like to record some important aspects of the historical journey of this mission, with some contextual information on the country and its cultural traditions, and the Catholic Church and Christianity in Uganda, as well as pointing out some approaches to the future. In this task, we are indebted to the writings of Fr. Tom O Connor who bequeathed a valuable document entitled 'Remembering Ten Years on Ugandan Mission'. From now on, whoever comes from abroad to this mission will need to read, reflect, meditate, contemplate and pray...having before him the rich and insightful contents of these 'living memories' of Fr. O Connor! This reading was a blessing of God for us and a source of inspiration in having a better understanding of our mission and certain cultural realities of Uganda. I encourage the Province to publish this living experience as a book.

## Some Information about the Geography and History of Uganda

The Republic of Uganda, one of the smaller countries of this great continent, lies on the equator to the east of Africa. It is considered part of East Africa along with neighbouring Kenya and Tanzania. It obtained independence from Britain in 1962 and became a republic in 1967. It has a population of 35 million, most of whom are Christians (50% of these are Catholic, the others belong to the Anglican Church of Uganda); 10% of the population is Muslim. Uganda was called '*The pearl of Africa*' by Sir Winston Churchill because of its favourable climate. English and Luganda are the official languages. Luganda was chosen because it is the language of the Baganda, the largest of the 32 tribes who are concentrated in the south of the country, which includes the capital, Kampala, a city that today has approximately 4 million inhabitants.

Jinja, where the Camillian mission is located today, is the second largest city in the country, with approximately 1.2 million inhabitants. The distance from Entebbe airport to Jinja is 120 kilometres. The journey is made by car and takes taking approximately four to four and a half hours, passing through downtown Kampala, the capital of the country. This is an extremely busy road and the areas along the road are highly populated. All along this road there is an open market where the population sells and exchanges all kinds of goods necessary for daily life.

Ugandans of the Jinja region proudly talk to visitors and say that Jinja is the *place where one of the most important rivers in the world, the Nile, begins* (its source) In fact, there is an interesting tourist trip, a boat ride to a place on Lake Victoria, near to Jinja, which we enjoyed very much.

The first Catholic missionaries were the White Fathers led by Fr. Simeon Lourdel who arrived in 1879. By that time the Church of England mission was already established under the leadership of an engineer, Alexander Mackay. He was very much opposed to Catholicism and this was to cause serious problems later on. Meanwhile, Christianity (both Anglican and Catholic) took hold quickly and even produced Ugandan martyrs – 23 Protestants and 22 Catholics – at the end of the nineteenth century, mainly in the years 1883-1886. *Pope Paul VI* canonised the Catholic martyrs in 1964 and visited the country in 1969. *Saint John Paul II* visited Uganda in 1993 and more recently *Pope Francis* visited the country on 27-29 November 2015. He celebrated Holy Mass in the park of the Catholic Martyrs Basilica which is dedicated to the Martyrs of Uganda, in Namugongo, just outside the capital, Kampala, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the proclamation of the Ugandan martyrs as saints by Pope Paul VI. The Catholic Church in Uganda today has nineteen dioceses.

We deeply thank our Ugandan Camillian religious brothers for taking us – while we were on our way back to the airport to go to Tanzania – on a visit to both places, which are near to one another and where the memory of these martyrs is alive: a shrine with a beautiful museum, of the Church of England, and the Catholic basilica dedicated to the Martyrs of Uganda.

## The Ugandan Cultural Outlook and the Meaning of Sickness and Death

Fr. John Mary Walligo, professor of history at the Catholic Uganda Martyrs University, has said about the African outlook on health, sickness, death, dying and care for the sick:

'There are four main categories of diseases in the African outlook: a) African indigenous diseases; b) Western foreign diseases; c) chronic diseases; and d) the plague or epidemics.

The cultural belief that every disease has an external cause and thus an ardent search for the cause of the disease before the search for the cure.

The cultural belief that there is a cure for cancer, HIV/AIDS and for any other disease if only a greater search was made in the right direction.

In African traditional religion, the Creator-God is the primary source of all healing and cure. All others receive their healing power and curing power from God. For any cure, thanks must first be given to God and much later to the medical personnel.

When you are treated for an illness in a religious atmosphere, you have more hope and confidence that you will be cured because there the medical staff use both God and scientific medicine.

When sick, everybody's prayers and good wishes are most welcome: from Catholics, Protestants, Muslims and traditionalists. You can never know which prayer works best; in any case, such knowledge does not matter.

At no time during sickness, even when all the signs are that you are about to die, should anyone abandon the possibility of a 'miraculous recovery of a sick person. Anyone who dares to predict that the sick person is not going to survive the night or the weekend can be seen as a 'witch'. Anyone who prepares for the dead body or makes any arrangement in that direction is seen as a 'witch'.

In sickness, one's ancestors, the living-dead, are invoked and the ancestral 'deities' are also invoked to provide a much needed intervention for a cure or healing.

Medicine and religion in Africa are inseparable. Before taking medicine, most African sick people say a prayer to God or bless themselves so as to make the medicine truly work. Any medical 'atheist' who does not give medicine in the name of God is ignored.

In the African world-view, every person can be medicine for another person; every species of animal, bird, fish and living creature is medicine for a sick person; every plant, leaf, root and skin of a plant is medicine for a sick person. Every inanimate thing – soil, clay, sand, rock, a mountain, a river, the sea, the ocean, etc. – is also medicine for a sick person. The world below, the world above, the world of the cosmos are all medicines for a sick person'.

As we can understand from this description, the vision of these important realities of human life is completely different from our Western way of thinking. This cultural and tribal fear of sickness and especially death, which is also felt by diocesan priests (and indeed by bishops who have shared that fear with me), means that a large percentage of the sick and particularly the dying receive little or no pastoral care from the Catholic Church. In fact, the Ugandan Bishops Conference at their regular meeting in 2001 declared that 'the most neglected part of evangelisation from the very beginning has been pastoral care for the sick'.

During this visit to the Camillians in Jinja, we had also had the privilege to take part in a Mass with the people of the local sugar factory. It was a true festival of songs and dances, with many speeches at the beginning and the end; they brought gifts and showed affection when welcoming the visitors. People were dressed in colourful clothes, had smiling faces and sung with full lungs at any moment. Singing is very natural to the Ugandans. There is always a choir which spends hours during the week in very serious practice with more and more musical instruments, like keyboards and the guitar, added to the ensemble. According to what we saw and heard, the entire day can be spent in celebrations and a five-hour liturgy is commonplace especially on special liturgical occasions. The homily can go on for anything up to a whole hour...obviously they have a different concept of time to us from the West.

When referring to death or dying in an ordinary conversation, the other person's swift reaction is to say: "don't talk about death and dying". Graves, coffins, and indeed relics of the saints are seen as contrary to thought and speech because they are connected with the dead, and this is true even of dead saints. Parish clergy who have to attend a funeral/burial service make sure with the family beforehand that all is ready so that they can come, recite the necessary prayers, and immediately depart. Obviously, this complex reality and the mentality of the Church leaders of not taking care of the sick and dying of the community, is truly for us Camillians very strange and indeed difficult to accept.

### **African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Witchcraft**

African traditional religion (ATR) in Uganda and in Black Africa as a whole is found in the culture in all human lifestyles, and at all levels: the individual, the family, the clan and the tribe and even in relationships with other tribes. It is not a religion in the strict Western sense. It is by nature pluralistic and allows the individual, the family or group to search for suitable deities who can function the best for the customer. Christianity and Islam came with the aim of eliminating ATR. The British colonialists were determined to work with the new religions to destroy ATR and build a new colonial country.

One does not have to live very long among the people of Africa before coming face to face with the dreaded word, and even more the dreaded reality, of 'witchcraft'. Scratching just a little below the

surface of people's understanding of life and way of living, reveals a deep-seated awareness of many aspects of traditional witchcraft which is every bit as much alive today as it was during the centuries of paganism. Even among such public figures as parliamentarians regular contact with witchcraft is common.

"In Ireland we are well accustomed to superstition", says Tom O Connor. There are many examples which especially those of us who were raised in the countryside came up against at a very early age. But witchcraft and possession by evil spirits in Uganda is very much a different story both in the understanding of the people as a whole and in the deep-seated convictions of individuals. Witches and witchdoctors can be found everywhere – as close as next door. Within weeks of my arrival in Uganda, I was brought to a beauty spot frequented by tourists where every weekend witchdoctors meet for a witchcraft session. Indeed, on that occasion and at that very moment many of them passed us on the way to their designated site. They were armed with live chickens and other small animals to be sacrificed during the session, when, indeed, blood would be sprinkled on the participants.

When sickness or any other calamity strikes, the patient automatically asks "who gave it to me?" and not "what gave it to me?" Then the witchdoctor's hunt takes place to find who it was that had bewitched or cursed the patient or set a spell on him. Cleverly, the witchdoctor, along with the patient, who unwittingly identifies an enemy or two, confirms who the enemy is and proceeds to reverse the curse back to the presumed curser while at the same time emptying the pockets of the unfortunate patient. While the mystery of evil remains for all of us, it is among the poor and the ignorant that the role of the witchdoctor is sought after, leaving only one winner as the poor get poorer and witchcraft thrives into the next generation.

Faced with this very complex cultural reality, with the presence of rites and practices of witchcraft and popular religion, the challenge emerges of how to evangelise this culture and its people.

### **Some Information on how the Camillians Arrived in Uganda!**

The Anglo-Irish Province, with the development of the Lay Camillian Family, started to study the possibility of founding a mission and decided on Uganda for a millennium project. Uganda was chosen because of its closeness to Kenya and Tanzania and also because the official language is English. Two exploratory visits (1998 and 1999) served to identify the reality of health and the needs of the sick in six different dioceses and to meet their respective bishops. Subsequent invitations came from five of those bishops. The invitation from Bishop Ssekamanya of the Lugazi diocese was chosen and the first two Camillians, Fr. Tom O'Connor and Tom Smith, arrived on 14 October 2000. The hopes of the Province for a Camillian missionary foundation as a millennium project came true. The first challenge was the complete restoration, by the Province, of a house given on loan by the bishop in the compound of St. Francis Hospital, Nyenga, ten miles from the town of Jinja.

The Province agreed to accept the invitation from the Bishop of the diocese of Lugazi, Matthias Ssekamanya. There were two reasons for this choice: the first was that Lugazi is sufficiently near to the capital city, Kampala. It would have been a serious mistake to open a new (the first) mission if it had been lost in the wilderness and miles from the capital city. The second reason was that Lugazi had only recently been established (1996) as a diocese and it was felt that it was good to be part of something new, bearing in mind in particular the needs of the sick. The first Camillians to come to Uganda, Fr. Tom O Connor and Tom Smith, lived during their first nine months in Uganda in the diocesan seminary.

### **The Development of the Camillian Ministry: Responding to Urgent Cries!**

The Camillian ministry as it initially developed had three dimensions: 1) *setting up a mobile clinic for the care of HIV/AIDS patients who were sick and dying in the bush*; 2) *the animation of pastoral care in health* and 3) *vocation promotion*. The mobile clinic functioned for several years at the beginning, running to reach the sick in their homes in the bush. With the help of local doctors and nurses, drugs and

essential medication and counselling were provided for the sick and dying as well as food for orphans whose parents had died because of AIDS.

The animation of pastoral care in health had a Camillian, Fr. Tom Smith, as member of the bishops' taskforce for the development of pastoral care for the sick at a national level, as well as retreats, work and prayer days for health-care personnel. A vocation promotion team was made up of three lay people involved in health care and the vice-rector of the local minor seminary. Their role was to assist in the promotion of vocations and also in the assessment of those who draw near.

Today we have as a functioning unit the *Saint Camillus Clinic* which was built near the seminary. It is starting to take care of the health of people, with a maternity section about to be opened, and gives courses on health and nutrition, both in-house and in many places of the local community. This activity is implemented with the help of various volunteers who are health-care professionals from Ireland.

On the feast day of St. Camillus in 2002, the Camillians received an invitation from the neighbouring bishop, Joseph Willigers, of Jinja, to open a house in his diocese. The initial objective was to develop a centre that would serve as a conference/retreat centre for the promotion of pastoral care in health. This would include training courses for all categories of health-care workers, for chaplains, both clerical and lay, for parish priests and catechists, and for major seminarians. The centre would also serve as a 'Come and See' location for prospective candidates, for lay people who work for our project (the Lay Camillian Family), for visiting religious brothers and for visitors in general.

The initial work was with a mobile health clinic (2004). At this initial moment an agreement was also signed by Cardinal Wamala (4 May 2004) for the 'Kiira Road Project', with the objective of training diocesan priests in pastoral care for the sick. This project involved ten diocesan priests who had studied this pastoral care at the Camillianum in Rome. At the outset, the Camillians were much involved with the whole of the Church of Uganda, having a close relationship principally with bishops and priests, in order to promote pastoral care in health in parishes and hospitals. Several courses of clinical pastoral education and pastoral care in many dioceses of Uganda, and even in neighbouring countries, were given thanks to the cooperation of Camillians from Europe, amongst whom were Fr. Alselmo Zamboti and Fr. Arnaldo Pangrazzi.

Fr. Mushi arrived at the mission in 2004 on a two-year loan from the Tanzanian mission. He then returned to Tanzania and today he provides formation at our mission in that country.

The First Camillian from India, Fr. Johnson, arrived in Jinja on 1 June 2010. Fr. Shibin followed on 3 August 2010. He stayed for two and a half years but after contracting leukaemia returned to India where, regrettably, he died soon afterwards. With the arrival of the Camillians from India, Tom O'Connor returned definitively to the Anglo-Irish Province on 1 September 2010.

The **first Ugandan Camilian, Richard Lubaale**, made his perpetual profession on 2 January 2011 and was ordained a priest on 14 July 2011. The new **Camillian Health Centre** was opened on 6 April 2014 and the **St. Camillus Seminary**, in Kimalaka, Jinja, was officially blessed on Saint Camillus Day, 14 July 2015.

The compound of the Camillians in Kimalaka, Jinja, is really beautiful and well planned. It shows the deep commitment of the Anglo-Irish Province to this missionary undertaking. Not only by investing more than half a million euros (the Saint Camillus Seminary, the House of the Guests and the Saint Camillus Clinic) in the infrastructure of the buildings, but also through the constant presence of the Provincial, the cooperation of lay people through donations, and the presence of volunteers who come to help in the clinic as health-care professionals.

### **Looking into the Future: Seeds for our Hope!**

The hope, and also the enthusiasm (*'that generates optimism and optimism builds self-confidence'*) that our religious brother Tom O Connor (2005), one of the pioneers and the heart of this mission from the outset, where he remained for the first ten years, expressed in his spiritual thought is truly moving: 'Looking to the future, we are conscious of the need for more manpower until, in God's own time, enough Camillians will consolidate and extend this mission. As in the case of other Camillian missionary

foundations, we too look forward to development into a self-sustaining Mission in Uganda by Ugandans. In the meantime, we extend our gratitude to God for all His blessings and to our Province and the Order for the wonderful support and encouragement given to us in this newest of 'little plants'. Even though we have 'just arrived in Uganda', we have every reason to be men hope".

In closing this message we take the opportunity to thank God for all the commitment (and enthusiasm) of the Anglo-Irish Province to this mission, with the constant presence of the Provincial (staying at least one week during 3 to 4 visits a year), providing generously all the human and material support that is needed for the growth of this mission. A special 'thank you' from the Order to the first Camillian pioneer missionaries, Fr. Tom O Connor ('*even in the autumn of his life*' is how he likes to express it) and Fr. Tom Smith, for bringing the seeds of the Camillian charism to Uganda.

A 'thank you' from the bottom of our hearts for the fantastic welcome that you gave to us, for the faith and the hope that we shared together during our meetings and personal dialogue.

May God and the Martyr Saints of Uganda sustain your courage in the face of potential challenges when spreading the good news of the gospel in your country as Camillians! May our founder Saint Camillus bless you all, keeping you always healthy and happy when serving with Samaritan compassion in the health-care field!

Fraternally yours,

*Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 21 April 2016*

**Fr. Leocir Pessini, MI**  
*Superior General*

**Fr. Laurent Zoungana, MI**  
*Vicar General*