

Sister Barbara O'Dea, DW Presents Leadership Program in Zambia

Sister Barbara O'Dea, who recently completed twelve years as Superior General of the Daughters of Wisdom, shares this experience.

The phone call from Rome came as a surprise. The familiar voice of Sr. Victoria Gonzalez de Castejon rscj, secretary-general of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG), informed me that she had suggested my name to a Nairobi based African association of major superiors as a presenter on leadership in Religious congregations. An e-mail from Sr. Catherine Okari, ibvm, executive secretary of the group followed shortly. Knowing the point of development and the immense needs of Religious Life in Africa, it was an offer I could not refuse.

Scheduled for Zambia in mid-February, the session was one of three funded by a grant from the Propagation of the Faith for the major superiors in nine English speaking countries of Africa. Geographically, Zambia, located in central Africa, borders on Malawi where I have happy memories of past visits to the Daughters of Wisdom of our vice-province there. Why not a brief visit there en route to Zambia! The response to the idea from Africa was warm, welcoming and immediate.

It was a joy to return, having witnessed the development of the province over the past twelve years. The young Sisters of the past decade, matured by experience and professional studies were now provincial councilors and formators, headmistresses in schools, nurses in dispensaries and hospitals. What a joy to see old friends and to meet the newest members.

The session was held at Zambian Episcopal Conference (ZEC) Center in Lusaka. Interestingly, its rooms were named for the Bishops of the various dioceses of Zambia. Mine bore the title Bishop of Solwezi. There I met the other team members, Sr. Catherine Okari from the Association of Consecrated Women of Eastern and Central Africa (ACWECA) who coordinated our efforts, Dr. Gertrude Abuno, a specialist in development from Kenya, my colleagues for the week. My contribution was to focus on a vision of Religious Life for today and the leadership role to encourage communion through animation, decision-making and coordination for mission. Dr. Abuno handled personnel management and grant proposals.



Twenty-eight congregational leaders, the team members and the executive secretaries of two national conferences were in attendance. Having chartered a minibus, the twelve participants from Malawi arrived in Lusaka together on the 16th, those from Zambia, throughout the following day. That evening we gathered for introductions and an exchange of our hopes and expectations for the session.

Sign of the maturing of religious life in Africa. 21 major superior were Africans, others were missionaries from Ireland, Italy and India. Interest and motivation were high as we delved into the task at hand personally and in

small groups. Fortunately, enthusiasm outweighed fatigue as the group advanced. It was exhilarating to witness the excitement of one or another leader as she glimpsed new insights and recognized new possibilities in the presentations and in the multiple experiences shared. The good news was palpable as we listened to accounts of what local communities are actually engaged in on a day to day basis: initiatives in work with groups of village women, helping people to launch collaborative micro projects to support their families, better healthcare especially for women and children.

Discoveries gleaned from reviewing their experience in light of our vocation to be good news encouraged several to speak of doing a similar review in their local areas. The focus moved from solving problems to naming transformations that were both possible and desirable. One participant noted that she tends to take the work of her Sisters for granted, not realizing the potential for social transformation that communities truly centered on God expressed in the service of God's people could have.

For another, to look at the gospel from the angle of the vision and values of the Reign of God that Jesus witnessed and preached changed her vision of mission. She was eager to communicate it to her Sisters.

A free afternoon in the capital provided a necessary break and the opportunity to purchase books, materials and even a few souvenirs to bring home.

By the end of the session participants had explored the changing values in their respective societies, probed the gospel values underlying the vows and community life form that is ours and discovered what social impact their apostolic religious life might give witness to. In our final session it was impressive to listen as major superiors sketched the outline of the strategic plan each proposed to take home to present to her councilors and the Sisters of her congregation.

Surely these women will be among the prophets of hope in their various milieus.

Photo above, an informal chat in Lusaka

Photo below, a group gathers for reflection

