

Press release – December 12, 2016

The 50th anniversary for the Focolare Movement and the Bangwa people of Cameroon

Solemn celebrations in Fontem, from 14 to 17 December 2016, to mark the end of the year of thanksgiving announced by Msgr. Andrew Nkea, Bishop of Mamfe.

“Through the Focolare Movement, God has visited the Bangwa people (...). They have lived the pact of mutual love with the Bangwa people and taught them the spirituality of unity and universal brotherhood (...). They have reduced the infant mortality within these years from close to 90% to almost zero; they have tirelessly worked hard to eliminate the deadly Tsetse Fly that made Fontem look like the valley of death; thousands of Lebialem people would not have had a good education without them; good health facilities have been at our door steps all these years (...). Now is the time to celebrate the love of God for all the Lebialem people”.

These quotes are taken from the letter written by Msgr. Andrew Nkea, Bishop of Mamfe to announce the year 2016 as a Jubilee year of thanksgiving to God for the arrival of the Focolare Movement amongst the Bangwa people. In this letter, one finds a prayer to be recited daily together the Bishop's words that highlight the most important moments of these 50 years of history and recall the protagonists and all those who gave their lives towards them. It also expresses the feelings of the Fons – the kings of the territories of this region -, of persons holding positions of responsibility and of the entire population.

The first focolarini doctors arrived in Fontem in 1966. The state of emergency of the Bangwa people became a priority for the whole Focolare Movement. Chiara Lubich paid her first visit to Fontem that same year and she was given a great welcome by the king, Fon Defang, important personalities and the whole population. She visited Fontem another two times. In May 2000, when she addressed all the Bangwa, gathered in the wide open space in front of the Fon's palace, she said: *“I feel that I cannot leave you without having made a solemn pact with you. A strong and binding pact of mutual love. It is a sort of oath by which we promise to be always fully at peace with one another and to be always ready to make peace and start again whenever our promise is broken”.*

This jubilee year will come to its end with a solemn celebration to be held from the 14 to 17 December 2016. The Fons and other heads of institutions have been actively involved in the preparation of this celebration, which was presented to the Prime Minister, Philémon Yang at Yaoundé last October. Since then, it is being recognized as a national event.

The programme includes: the success of *Our Lady Seat of Wisdom* College, which, with 500 students per year, is among the best five pre-university institutions in the anglophone Cameroonian system; life and work experiences of the Focolare Movement in Fontem; an International Conference on Interreligious Dialogue between Christianity and the African Traditional Religion, in these last 50 experience among the Bangwa people.

Today, the inculturation of Christianity seems to have become more obvious. Martin Nkafu, the African philosopher and theologian, director of the department of Human and Social Sciences in the International Research Area at the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome, says: *“Christianity has not changed the people's mentality; a Bangwa who adheres to Christ keeps his personality, his culture, and has an integrated vision of reality; and as Pope John Paul II said in Nairobi in 1982, this allows him to be authentically African and deeply Christian”.*

Among the initiatives achieved during this year, one finds the Fons' pilgrimage to Rome. They came last September to celebrate the Jubilee of Mercy with Pope Francis and to visit the places of Mafua Ndem, “the queen sent by God”, as Fon Lucas Njifua of Fontem called Chiara Lubich on her last visit to Cameroon. A competition, entitled “God's intervention in the history and life of the Nweh Mundani people” has also been organized and promoted throughout the year among students in all primary and secondary schools. 4000

people were involved in this project, which included poetry, songs, literary compositions and quizzes; 700 students from 21 schools participated through their various works.

This event mobilizes and brings together even the Bangwa people who during the last years left Cameroon. A Development Commission, with members in Cameroon and in other countries, has started to dialogue with State bodies in view of concrete actions regarding education, health, youth and women's status.

This 50th anniversary celebration is being followed by the Focolare Community world-wide. The president, Maria Voce has closely accompanied the preparation for it, while Jesús Morán and the Central council members responsible for Africa will be present in Fontem.

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