

**TRAVEL JOURNAL**  
**CIB CONFERENCE MEETING– COMMUNIO INTERNATIONALIS BENEDICTINARUM**  
**SEPTEMBER 2-16, 2011**  
**REGION 17: WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA AND MADAGASCAR**

**SEPTEMBER 2 - Arrival in LOMÉ, TOGO**

Surprisingly all of the Conference participants arrived on the same day. We were welcomed at the airport by Sister Marie Fidégnon, a member of the Dzogbégan community and the person in charge of organizing the entire conference. Sister Judith Ann Heble, the CIB Moderator and the members of the Administrative Council had arrived earlier for a meeting on August 30 and September 1, in Koubri, Burkina Faso at the monastery of our hostess, Mother Henriette W. Kalmogo. She is the Region 17 Delegate (West Africa, Central Africa and Madagascar). Upon arriving at the airport some of the participants had gone directly to the Spirituality Center of the Canossian Sisters. Mother Angela Strobel arrived on Brussels Airline (via Belgium), at 5 p.m. and waited for the group I was in that arrived at 7 p.m. by Air France. Two cars were a really tight fit for us with all of our luggage. Finally, we somehow managed to arrange five people on one row of seats. Upon arriving safe and sound, we were shown to our accommodations, had a nutritious meal and received instructions about the next day's activities. We were to meet at the local community Mass with Lauds at 6 a.m. After breakfast we would be leaving at 9 o'clock on the first of the journeys that would take us through Togo, Ghana and Benin.

**SEPTEMBER 3**

After Mass there was great joy as participants greeted one another: Sister Judith Ann (USA, moderator), Sister Mary Jane (USA, secretary), Mother Gian Paola and Sister Cristina her translator (Italy), Mother Fabienne (France), Mother Zoë (Great Britain), Mother Martyna (Poland), Madre Anastazija (Croatia) with Maja her translator, Sister Christine (USA) Sister Anne (USA) Sister Patricia (USA), Mother Vania (Brazil), Mother Mary John (Philippines), Sister Kym (Australia), Mother Metilda (India), Mother Henriette (Burkina Faso), Mother Angela (Rome/Tutzing). After breakfast our luggage was arranged on top of the minibus we would be traveling in and then covered with protective canvas and ropes. Just as this operation was in progress Abbot Primate Notker Wolf arrived to participate in the first week of the Conference.

**DZOGBÉGAN, TOGO**

We then began our pilgrimage to our first destination, Dzogbégan, the Monastery of the Assumption in Danyi Apéyémé, northern Togo. We traveled over dirt roads and up and down mountains. We came quite close to Togo's highest mountain: Monte Agou. About noon we had gone as far as Kpalimé. It is a crowded and bustling city that is the episcopal see. We saw the cathedral from afar and were told that the Bishop was on a trip through Europe. He had left a message which was read to us later during the conference. We could only stop for a midday meal around 2:30 p.m. After this stop we traveled steadily upward through very mountainous terrain. At this point, quite fatigued, we began to wonder when we would finally arrive. Then, there we were at the summit where we encountered a populous area with villages and cities and the good news that we were almost there. Finally, after a five hour journey, we arrived at the entrance to the Monastery of the Assumption and were greeted by Mother Prioress Blandine and several

sisters of that community as well as the superiors of the monasteries of the hostess region: Mother Paul from Bouaké (Ivory Coast), Mother Raphael from Friguiagbé (Guinea), Mother Josephine from Babete (Cameroon), Sister Gabriel (Madagascar), Mother Marie-Reine (Toffo – Benin). The regional delegate, Mother Henriette of Koubri (Burkina Faso) was arriving with us. The monastery is at the very top of a mountain. The air is very humid and the sun appears only occasionally. We were able to experience some of the frequent and lengthy downpours. The landscape around the monastery is a mix of mountains and valleys covered with lush, humid forest.

Together we went into the church for prayer according to the manner our father, Saint Benedict taught us to receive guests. After a brief prayer of reception and of gratitude for our safe journey, we went to get our luggage. The scene was a memorable one as the driver handed down suitcase after suitcase into the outstretched hands of the sisters of varied skin tones, races, and cultures who were gathered there: Africans, Asians, Europeans, Australian and Americans. From there we went to our respective accommodations, had lunch and enjoyed some free time. At 5 o'clock Vespers, we heard the beautiful melody of the psalms sung in French accompanied by local musical instruments called the KORA and the CITARA. The gestures at the beginning of prayer and at the Lord's Prayer, the profound silence on the mountain top together with the serene and intense silence the sisters so conscientiously observed, readily transported one to contemplation. This atmosphere kept many of us in chapel during the intervening time between Vespers and supper, after which we retired early.

#### **SEPTEMBER 4**

The community had already celebrated Matins at 5 o'clock, when we arrived for Lauds at 6:30. We then had breakfast, since it was Sunday and Mass would be at 9. The rest of the morning was free time. At 3 o'clock we left for the Monastery of the Ascension which belongs to the Federation of Subiaco (France) and is about two kilometers away from the monastery of the sisters. Abbot Teodoro Coco welcomed us and spent the afternoon with us. He showed us the monastery and told us some of its history. We also learned about the 50th Jubilee that celebrates the presence of the monks in that region. We sang vespers and had supper with the monks.

#### **SEPTEMBER 5**

Our Conference Meeting started at 8:30 with an opening ritual that was truly African: the delegation (representing the seven monasteries mentioned above) entered, singing and carrying symbols that commemorated the 10 years of the CIB. They then led the opening prayers. This was followed by the reading of Lc. 5, 1-11. Sister Judith Ann gave the opening address and Abbot Primate then spoke to us. Sister Judith Ann introduced the new Delegates and explained the absence of some others. That day's schedule was presented and we began by discussing and approving the three goals of the 2010 Symposium: solidarity, authenticity and reverence. The Sisters from West Africa were the first to share their efforts to put these goals into practice.

#### **SEPTEMBER 6**

Our assembly at 8:30 began with the reading of Lc. 6, 12-19. We divided up into groups to share the efforts each region has been making to put the objectives into practice. This exchange of

experiences was very enriching. After a pause for lunch we started with a prayer that led us to reflect on Chapter 72 of the RB. There was time for individual meditation followed by reflections in groups based on the theme "Living Stones." We received a picture of a stone wall. On these stones we were asked to write five fundamentals of monastic life. Each group then presented a summary to the larger group. The results converged on many of the same themes: prefer nothing to the love of Christ, obedience, life in community, personal and community prayer, the search for God, hospitality, silence, and humility. On this day, as on all others, Mass was celebrated at 11 o'clock by the Abbot Primate and by a monk from the Monastery of the Ascension. In the afternoon we divided into groups and worked on the theme for the next symposium. It was surprising how all the reflections seemed to converge toward the theme of "listening."

## **SEPTEMBER 7**

The morning was reserved for a tour of the monastery which is close to celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> Jubilee since it was founded in 1963. At 9 o'clock we met in chapel. Sister Marie Fidégnon explained in detail all the African symbols in the church on the altar, the lectern, the tabernacle, and the celebrant's chair. The ceiling is covered with bamboo symbolizing the preciousness of that place. This rich explanation revealed yet again the African sense of the sacred.

Next we visited the workshops where they make yogurt, sweets, tomato extract, avocado wine, liturgical vestments, and do embroidery. They also care for the vegetable garden and the fields.

Then we went outdoors, where a man explained and demonstrated the process of extracting liquid from the dende palm. This liquid is considered precious because, after fermenting a few days, it becomes an alcoholic beverage. We also observed how tomatoes are squeezed between stones, and how cooked yams are squashed in a pestle to produce a mush that is very important in African cooking.

In the afternoon at 3 o'clock we toured Dzogbégan. We were welcomed by the Chief of the Village in a very formal ritual. What a lot of people! It seemed like the whole town had congregated in the internal patio of the public school to greet us with dances accompanied by drums. The Chief was dressed like a sultan with a robe that extended from his shoulder to his feet and covered his entire person. On his head was a hat that resembled a crown and on his feet were golden sandals. Before the greetings, there was a ritual performed by four older men who carried a beverage and flour in order to honor the ancestors as is the custom in their traditions. The Chief then gave a welcoming speech in good English expressing great satisfaction because we had chosen this Village for our conference. In return, both Sister Judith Ann and the Abbot Primate expressed our gratitude. A group of children and young people danced rhythmically to the lively beat of drums. The crowd relaxed and men and women of all ages participated in one dance after the other, always accompanied by drums. Then the Sisters were also invited to take part in the dances. As the festival continued, we were invited to a room in the school where a lunch was served. There were bananas and peanuts, and yes, Coca Cola, Sprite and other "universal" beverages. Arriving back at the monastery we sang Vespers.

## **SEPTEMBER 8 - GHANA**

This was to be a picnic day in celebration of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the CIB. But first we had Mass at 6 o'clock followed by Lauds. The Abbot Primate bid us farewell and continued on to Burkina Faso to give conferences at the meeting of the junior sisters of the West African region. Also saying good-bye were the sisters from Madagascar, Ivory Coast and Guinea. It was planned that

our day in Ghana would be a trip to the Wli Waterfalls which is about 30 kilometers from Dzogbéban. It was 10:30 before we managed to leave, and we only arrived at the border between Togo and Ghana at 12:30, which was a trip of more than 30 kilometers.

We reached the place where we would have to leave the vehicles and walk, carrying our lunch which the sisters had prepared for us. On the path we were surrounded by forest and occasionally surprised by small streams and bridges. Our group demonstrated an exception vitality and disposition, hiking at a lively pace the 4 kilometer path to the falls which took us about an hour. The Wli Waterfall cascades from a height of 60 to 80 feet and is the highest in West Africa. The great force of the falling water agitated by the winds is a marvelous sight to behold. Then, shortly after arrival, the skies clouded over, the wind grew stronger and a very heavy rain began to fall. At this point we were tired, but we quickly ran to take shelter in a straw roofed structure nearby. There, as the rain fell, we enjoyed the delicious food the sisters had prepared for us. We shared a cake decorated to commemorate the 10 years of the CIB. The torrential rain continued for quite some time, but we managed to arrive back home by 5 o'clock. However, the longed for free-time afternoon that had been planned on the schedule had eluded us.

### **SEPTEMBER 9 - TOGO –DZOGBÉGAN**

We began the day's activities at 8:30 with Lectio Divina after which we discussed the calendar for 2011 to 2014. Sister Judith Ann explained the 2012 calendar which includes the Abbots Congress. We also went into greater detail about the 2013 Conference in Brazil.

After the mid-morning interval, Mother Anastazija from Croatia gave Sister Judith Ann a beautiful gold cross to celebrate the 10 years of CIB. We then continued our discussions. As on all other days, we met in chapel for None. However, on that day it rained so torrentially that it was impossible even to understand the readings and so we had to wait until the rain subsided before continuing our activities.

As the meeting finalized that afternoon, we were told that on the following morning we were to deliver our luggage to the drivers at 4:30 before going to breakfast. We were to be ready to leave at 5:30 to begin our journey to SADORI in northern Togo.

That evening we celebrated the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the CIB. The sisters of the community danced and sang. Each of us received a kanga with lettering in batik (made by the Burkina Faso community) commemorating the 10 years of CIB.

### **SEPTEMBER 10 - TRIP TO SADORI IN NORTHERN TOGO**

At the end of our trip that day we were to arrive in SADORI at the Emanuel Monastery which had been founded by the Dzogbéban community. For the trip there were two vehicles at our disposal. The smaller one, which seated 10 people, was not air-conditioned. The rear door had to be left slightly open and tied with ropes in order to accommodate all our luggage, bottles of mineral water, snacks and our mid-day meal. We managed to fit into the larger vehicle which was rather tightly packed, but with the advantage of being air-conditioned. As we traveled along, there were stops to "view the forest" when necessary and to have our midday meal. After passing through many cities and villages, we came to SOKODE, a busy, bustling regional commercial center. Close to KARA, when it was already about 6 p.m., we took a detour to AGBANG, to visit the Monastery of the Incarnation which belongs to the Congregation of Saint Ottilien. We visited the chapel which was built to resemble the shape of an egg, with the area representing the yolk at the center

where the altar is situated. The monks, who maintain a school with about 200 students, have already been able to send some of their members to the new Saint Ottilien monastery in Cuba. Our stay there was short because we still had a long part of the journey ahead of us. In the city of Kara, and from there on north, the Muslim presence and influence were readily visible. There were numerous small mosques, one right after the other along the road. Someone counted 50 during just one hour. The very good highway we traveled on, as well as the types of buildings we saw in the large city of KARA seems to indicate that the people here enjoy a higher standard of living.

At about 9 p.m. we finally arrived at the monastery where seven sisters live. Although the monastery was founded seventeen years ago, it has, as yet, received no vocations. After prayer in the chapel we had our evening meal. We had to wait for the drivers to retrieve our luggage from the two cars, and then carry it quite a long way to our rooms in the guest house. Some of us were only able to retire around 11 p.m.

### **SEPTEMBER 11 - SADORI**

It was Sunday and the Church was filled with people of all ages, especially children. The people of the village nearby are accustomed to coming to the Monastery for Mass. When there is no Mass on Sunday, there is a liturgical celebration. The Monastery is quite distant from a large city. Occasionally the Bishop is able to send a priest so that the community can have daily Mass. The people sang beautifully and joyfully. There was dancing at the beginning, at the offertory, and at the end. The choir had been well-prepared by the sisters for their role in the liturgy. After Mass we were able to greet the Village Chief.

In the afternoon we met with the local community. It was easy to perceive the importance of the presence of a contemplative monastery in this predominantly Muslim area. Following Vespers we went to chapel for adoration and then after supper we retired so as to be rested for the following day's journey.

### **SEPTEMBER 12 - TRIP TO BENIN**

Once again we were told to have our baggage ready at 4:30 a.m. and, already well trained by previous experience; we were ready to leave for Benin by 5:50. By now we understood quite well the African concept of time. We didn't really know exactly how long we would be on the road, but we understood better the terms or vocabulary used when talking about time. If someone said the trip would take 5 hours, we knew that in reality the trip would take twice that long. If a person said it would take one hour to arrive at a given place, we knew it would take two hours. We had finally learned what the African sisters call "the lesson of time." We think in terms of hours, Africans think in terms of time.

We retraced our route as far as ATAKPAME in about six hours. There we stopped for our midday meal in the patio of a public school. The director was having a meeting with the teachers in a *Jango* (stave-covered open-air pavilion). They readily offered to vacate the place for us so we could enjoy the meal the sisters in Sadori had so kindly prepared for us.

### **TOGO-BENIN BORDER**

We arrived at the Togo-Benin border, from where we began to think we would never leave. It took an hour and a half until our passports and visas were examined and stamped by the police of

both countries. We continued our journey and at 6:30 arrived at Our Lady of Hope Spirituality Center in the Diocese of Cotonou, Benin. The location is exceptionally beautiful, right on the very top of a mountain. The rooms for guests are small circular cottages topped with large statues of saints that look out over the valley. We were told that it was an Italian religious who had dreamed of a retreat house in that location. Since it was impossible for cars to drive up close to the

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cottages, we had to carry our bags up an incline to the cottages. Some children and young people readily offered to help us. Unfortunately, next morning some sisters were totally without water.

### **SEPTEMBER 13 - BENIN**

We met in chapel for Lauds at 7:30, followed by breakfast. Later, Father Louis Hondololo who had studied at the Augustinian in Rome spoke to us about "Woman in African Society." He interpreted the Scriptures from an African, as well as from a feminine point of view, placing women at the center. After small group discussions, we shared our insights in the larger group. After Mass we had our midday meal. Once again our luggage was placed on top of the larger car and in the back of the smaller one with the back door again half open and tied securely with rope.

On our way to the Benedictine community in Toffo we stopped in the city of Abomey to visit the Museum of History which tells the story of the 12 kings of the Dahomey people from 1625 to 1900. The ten palaces occupy an area of 47 hectares (about 116 acres). The museum occupies the palaces of King Ghezo and King Glele and illustrates the history of the powerful Dahomey Kingdom, preserving its symbols which represent the desire for independence as well as the resistance and the struggle against colonial occupation. The last dynasty also participated in slave trading until it was overthrown and sent into exile in Algeria and Mozambique.

On our tour through the museum we were accompanied by a young woman who spoke in French with simultaneous English translation provided by an American gentleman contracted for the occasion. As we still had a long way to go, around 4:30 we had to interrupt our pilgrimage through the many distant buildings of the former royal dwellings.

### **ARRIVAL IN TOFFO – BENIN**

At 7 p.m. we arrived at the community of the sisters in Toffo which was founded by the French Monastery of Vanves. There we had private rooms at the guest house which was very far away from the convent, but fortunately the cars with our bags could drive up close. After prayer and the evening meal we again went to the guest house by car.

### **SEPTEMBER 14 - TOFFO – BENIN**

After Lauds and breakfast we visited the Monastery. We spent quite some time in the chapel with its many beautifully carved doors representing scenes from the Old and New Testaments. At 10 o'clock, Archbishop Antoine Gaye of the Archdiocese of Contonou arrived. He told us the history of the evangelization of this African region. This year the diocese is celebrating the 150th Jubilee of the arrival of the first missionaries in Benin in 1861. After that, he celebrated Mass, together with two diocesan priests and a French priest, Father Sergé who comes regularly to the monastery. The Archbishop then had lunch with us at the guest house. At 3 o'clock we went to visit the Monastery of the monks in HAKAMÈ. Mount Tabor Monastery was quite a distance away.

Possibly we did not have the right directions because we only arrived there at 4:30. The trip was rather unpleasant with a lot of red clay dust. Also, parts of the road were very rough. The monastery was simple and modest without the African cultural influences that we had seen in other locations. We returned by a different route, guided by a monk in another car. There was in change in the day's schedule, as it was not possible to meet with the community that evening.

## **SEPTEMBER 15**

This morning we had Mass with Lauds, followed by the closing ceremony. In a few words Sister Judith Ann summarized basic information about the CIB and introduced the Delegates and Substitutes who were present. It was a simple, but beautiful ceremony. The CIB candle passed through the hands of each Delegate or Substitute starting with Mother Henriette, Delegate of the region that hosted this conference and was returned to Mother Judith who then gave it to Mother Gian Paola whose region will host the next Conference Meeting in September, 2012 in Italy.

The community then gathered at the church entrance to bid us farewell. After breakfast we were ready to leave at 9:30. We had been told to deliver our bags to the drivers before Lauds so that they would have plenty of time to accommodate them on top of the mail van. Even so, it was only at about 10:35 that we were able to leave for our next destination, which was the city of OUIDAH on the coast of Benin. It was this city that had been the port of departure for slaves as well as the port of entry for the missionaries. During the previous day's conference the Bishop had given us the news that the Holy Father would be visiting this city and officiating at Mass on November 21, celebrating the 150<sup>th</sup> Jubilee Year.

During our twelve hour journey, we stopped at the Spirituality and Training Center maintained by the John of God Congregation in GCOCOTOMEY where we could use the guest facilities. This was a rare departure from our normal routine of necessary stops along the way where the trees and bushes had always been our refuge. We passed through COTONOU and at 1 o'clock we arrived in OUIDAH, where we had intended to go to the seminary for our midday meal. This was not possible because a road was being built in preparation for the Holy Father's upcoming visit. However, we managed access by a back entrance and had a large room in the Catechetical Center at our disposal. There we enjoyed the meal the Toffo community had prepared for us. At 2:10 we left for a site that preserves the History of Slavery. Spread over this area and close to the beach are seven monuments honoring the slaves. One monument is called Plaza CHACHA which, translated, means, "Quickly, Quickly." It is calculated that about 6.000.000 slaves were bought and sold at that site. We saw several different monuments while a guide explained the different phases of the buying and selling of slaves that every person sold into slavery would have experienced. Among other explanations, were those about "The City of the Diaspora," "The House of Zomai," and the "House of Darkness" as well as about certain trees and symbols of the resistance. Finally, we arrived at the "Door of No Return" where the slaves left on boats to be taken to ships out at sea. Very close to this monument is "The Door of Hope" through which Christianity brought by the first missionaries arrived 150 years ago. Finally, in a great walled space there is a museum, in the center of which is a very large statue of a woman that represents Mother Africa. Before her stand two well dressed black persons in western attire meant to represent all those Africans who have done well in the Americas. This monument represents Mother Africa's dream of having all her children back with her, at least for a visit. But, according to our guide, even more than that, she would like to have them all back to help in the development of Africa.

Then, by 4:35 we were again on the road traveling toward the Benin-Togo border, where we arrived at 6 o'clock. Although there was a great deal of traffic, including cars, trucks and a lot of people on foot, everything proceeded calmly. After having our documents checked we were again in the north of the country. Here the traffic was much more intense, but also much more organized, so that we were soon in Togo territory. It was only then that we realized that we were on our way without even having to get out of the car. This was quite different from the car with the other sisters and some of our baggage which was nowhere to be seen. There was no way to contact them by phone. Finally, around 7 p.m. Sister Marie managed to speak to the driver of the other car, who told her that he had gotten lost and had driven in the wrong direction. It was decided that we would go on ahead and Sister Marie would wait for them at the border station to help with legal procedures. We arrived at the Spirituality Center of the Canossian Sisters at 9:30, very tired, hungry, and worried about the other car. However, to our relief, they soon arrived.

## **SEPTEMBER 16**

This was the day that most of the sisters would be returning to their communities. Only Sister Kym from Australia would be leaving the next day. In spite of all the travelling, some sisters didn't seem to be at all tired. After breakfast Sister Mary John from the Philippines and Sister Metilda from India left for the airport. Another group of sisters wanted to go to a local market to buy souvenirs. The cars arrived late, so one went directly to the airport. The car destined for the market arrived even later and the sisters arrived back at 2:30. That was much later than anticipated and so Mother Angela of Rome and Mother Therese Marie from Belgium needed to leave immediately. However, the shoppers were happy with their purchases as the drivers had taken them to a well-stocked market where the prices were very reasonable.

At 6 p.m. it was time to leave for the larger group, the twelve sisters who were traveling on Air France. In Paris we went our separate ways. I had to hurry to get on the 7:15 flight to Lisbon, so I could not calmly take my leave of the other sisters who would be departing later.

These fifteen days on African soil were very enriching for each one of us. Since more than half of that time was spent traveling, we had ample time and opportunity to get to know, help, laugh with, and wait for each other. Together we prayed, worked in groups and arrived at decisions about how to strengthen our fraternal bonds with this African region. One way of doing that will be to remember these communities at holy Mass and in our prayers, especially on the day of each community's patron.

To Sister Marie Fidégnon who organized the whole conference, to Mother Prioresses Blandine and Marie Reine and to Sister Superior Esperança who welcomed us into their communities, we extend our gratitude and our prayers for their communities.



We would like all who contributed ---- Mother Henriette, regional delegate , all the participants in the CIB Conference and especially our moderator, Sister Judith Ann and Sister Mary Jane, secretary, ---- to know that we will always carry with us the memory of this very concrete experience of the solidarity that brought us closer to each other, the reverence displayed in such varied and sometimes difficult situations, and the authenticity of our Benedictine way of life as expressed in our fraternal bonds.

Olinda, October 28, 2011  
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