

INTERVIEW WITH FERNANDO NEGRO

With his feet firmly in the present and his heart open to the Spirit

"If I were to be reborn, I should be a Piarist again", says Fr. Fernando Negro at the end of this interview, and he is absolutely convinced after 22 years of his missionary vocation. In 1987, after a year spent in the Hispanic quarter of New York, he left Spain, in the company of two other Piarists, to found "Piarist Cameroon". In Cameroon, "which was flourishing in that period", he tells us with undisguised joy that he stayed there for 16 years. In 2003 he returned to Madrid and one year later left for India, where he was the master of the juniors and Provincial delegate of the area, which is an integral part of the Province of Argentina.

Fr. Fernando Negro is 53 years' old. He is a teacher and a graduate in Spanish Language. He was born in a small village called Bello, in the province of Teruel in Aragon, Spain. He hails from a large family of 10 children, 3 of whom are Piarist priests.

He has recently been sent to New York, to an interdemarcational and international community, "in which Piarists of the Province of Aragon, of Vasconia, of the Vice-Province of Cameroon and two Juniors of the Piarist Province of the USA, live together."

You entered the seminary at the age of 11?

Well, when I was 11 I joined the Piarist College of Christ the King in Saragossa, a minor seminary, in order to study and to understand the call of the Lord. My two elder brothers, Carlos and José María, did not follow the same path as me because they were not called by God to do so. In my case, little by little, I felt the desire to become a priest, until, at the age of 18, I decided to go ahead and enter the novitiate at Peralta de la Sal. Thus my life was directed towards the religious life and to priesthood within the Piarist Order.

Tell us how you went to Cameroon.

I had wanted to be a missionary since I was very young. During the years I was being trained, this calling became stronger and stronger. I felt that the first six years of my priesthood, which I spent working, training and teaching in the Calasanz Institutes of Christ the King in Saragossa, were only the prelude to my missionary life, and I started two missionary groups then. At a certain point I let my superiors know about this desire of mine and in 1986 I was sent to Brooklyn (NY). During that year research was carried out by the Piarist Province of Aragon to find the best place to start a mission. Three places were under consideration: Bolivia, the Philippines and Cameroon. This idea had the support of the Fr. General, José María Balcells, who suggested that every Province should have a missionary project. To tell you the truth, the place I least expected to go to and which least attracted me, was Cameroon itself; but the Provincial Assembly almost unanimously voted to go to Cameroon, and so I ended up there. Of such is the way of the Lord and also the way of obedience.

Was there nothing there? Where did you go?

I recall that on 25th December 1987 we left for what was virgin territory for the Piarists. There were three of us: Angel Valenzuela, who is still there, Juan Yzuel, who is now a married man with three children and works in one of our institutes in Saragossa, and me. When we arrived it was an interesting experience because we had arranged with the Bishop of Bamenda and with our Provincial Superior, Fr. Cecilio Lacruz, that we would live separately in different missions, in order to speed up our settling in and familiarization with the culture. Throughout this time we were blessed with the support of the Archbishop of Bamenda, Mons. Paul Verdzev, who a short while ago was a recipient of our Brotherhood Card.

That was a good idea. What was your aim there?

Our aim was to imbue ourselves with that new mentality and try to learn the language of the people; to learn the culture slowly but deeply, amid the local churches, become familiar with new customs and, after some months had passed, to meet again in a place where we should be able to begin our mission. It really was very interesting. I was sent physically to a mission in the midst of the Bafut tribe, in the forest. I knew only a few words of English and it was a great challenge. But in nine months I managed to learn the language of these people, English and Pidgin English. I became very attached to them and when I left they baptized me with a typical name of their tribe: Ngwa.

Pidgin English?

It is a kind of broken English, and is the means of communication in many East African countries. One theory is that it grew up along coastline settlements as a lingua franca for commercial reasons. Others think that it developed from the language brought back by those ex-USA slaves who decided to return to their roots in Africa.

And did you have much contact with the other two Piarists?

Yes, certainly. We had agreed to meet once a week to exchange reports on our experiences, our discoveries, our personal growth and also to celebrate the Eucharist together. This meeting was held in different places so that little by little we would get to know the map of the local churches, the congregations, the religious communities, priests and so on. After nine months, as if it were a birth after gestation, we met up definitively to live in a community and to start our mission.

I imagine that in spite of enriching you on the human side, it must have been a difficult time. Did you never feel like running away?

Yes, it was certainly difficult. I compare it to a "dark night" because it was like being born again, learning new ways, opening yourself to a new life in which all was practically unknown to you. The language was a big problem too, and another one was the new mentality of their Church, which was so different from that which I had inherited from Spain and New York. Sometimes one really felt like a child. I had some dark moments, of great loneliness, and that's why I refer to that image of St. John of the Cross's, when he speaks of the "dark night of the soul". But not for anything in the world would I change it. I thank God for having given me this experience which has been a help to me.

How did you feel then, when you had to leave Cameroon for good?

You know, in life there is growth and there are limits and one also has to make way for others. 16 years in Cameroon was a wonderful experience. I had many attacks of marsh fever, which undermined my health. There are times when you see that your road has been travelled and that there are many others ready to step into your shoes. I was able to witness the birth of our Cameroon Piarist presence; the seedling has grown and, since the beginning of 2008, has become a Vice-Province. I am proud of having been able, with the grace of God, to have had a part in its making, in the full realization that nobody is indispensable, though we are all necessary.

So in 2003 you returned to Spain. Was it a shock for you?

Well yes, I did return to Madrid, where for a year I was Novice Master, even though my mandate was supposed to be for 4 years. I landed in the Novitiate community which had a magnificent team of trainers and my four novices, and adapting myself to life there was not as difficult as one might have expected. In 2004, as there were no novices in Spain, the new Fr. General, Jesús Lecea, asked: "What do you think of moving to India to help formation there?". And so I went there, to Bangalore, where we have a flourishing juniores institute.

To India, where there is a great future...

Yes, a great future indeed. At present there are five places in India where we are present, one of which is in the state of Jharkhand, in the middle of a tribe which lives in great poverty. Most of our energy goes to vocations, and our greatest challenge is that of the Piarist ministry. It is very important that these vocations should be provided with a course on the Ministry, so that they will be a hundred per cent Piarist.

Vocation and Ministry?

Certainly. We must train these young people to the best of our ability. We already have a fair number of Indian priests who are capable of carrying out Piarist work very well indeed. As I have said, the challenge is that of creating an environment of Piarist ministry: schools and institutes, where we can provide and channel the character of Calasanz; and also give many other typically Piarist examples of our Ministry. India certainly brings out the creativity of Calasanz and the Piarists.

Do the religious who now live in Peralta also come from India?

Oh yes. It all began when the Fr. Provincial of Aragon, who is my brother, Javier Negro, asked me whether it might be possible to contact some religious from India who would like to collaborate with us in Peralta de la Sal. Two years ago, on Christmas Day, I went to Chennai to visit the community of the Sisters of Saint Annes, and, in a talk with their Provincial, Sister Leonie, I asked whether they had ever thought of extending their order outside India. She told me that they had not yet been invited to do so. And so I invited them to visit Peralta de la Sal. After the Mother General (Sister Leema Rose) had approved the project, I began teaching them Spanish, and here they are! Even though this is the first time they have been out of India, they are thinking of opening another community in Ecuador. The congregation was founded by a widow from the state of

Andra Pradesh (Gnanamma). She was illiterate and had five children, four of whom were priests. Now the Order has 700 religious, who are principally dedicated to education.

Your dreams?

When I think back upon my life, I recognise an interior desire for synthesis; something like wanting to find again a new depth so that I can guide my feet towards what I might call my mature stage. It is a dream of being able to grow in my experience of God and to give myself with generosity and enthusiasm wherever God wishes to lead me.

Have you had any spiritual crises?

No... well, yes. If by crisis you mean moments of sincere reflection and evaluation, seen as an opportunity for change, in order to accept my real life, and leaving behind that futility with which I sometimes clothed my behaviour and my actions. When I reached the age of 50, I wrote a short article about this very matter and I called the subject of the article "the spirituality of what is irrelevant". In such a context, a moment of crisis should not be dramatized. On the contrary, it is thanks to small and even big crises that we open ourselves to Grace, which works to drive us ever forward.

To tell the truth, you seem very happy in your vocation.

Yes, I am happy. Some years ago the theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx, wrote a book entitled "I Am a Happy Theologian". At that time I wrote something myself, which I called "I Am a Happy Piarist", but which I did not publish. But I go on saying the same thing today. If I were to be born again (an impossible conjecture since I do not believe in reincarnation but in the Resurrection), I should be a Piarist except that I should try to be better. And I should continue to invite others to be the same.

(By Julio César Boffano)