

- Towards the silver jubilee -

*The encounter of the Guanellian charism
with the African Continent:
the beginning*

0. A sort of introduction: a time for memories.

I started this short work for one of the Guanellian Days of formation in the African Delegation (which later could not hold for a number of setbacks, as it happens often, unfortunately). I had in mind to simply put together some data in a chronologic sequence and bring out of them some type of narration, with the aim of informing the new generation of confreres (more or less, those who joined after the year 2000) about the begin showing the hopes and wants, the problems and the resources, the discussions and the decisions of those early days. I was thinking I could in this way “tell the story”, and thus see the work of Providence in bringing the Guanellian spirit and mission to Africa.

But, as I was collecting materials and finding more and more names, situations, places which were sending a call to my personal life and memory, by bringing back to life feeling, sentiments and ideas that moulded an important part of my own life and that of some other confreres, I realised that some difficulties were rising in trying to make a sort of “impartial” work:

- It is too early to “write the history” of our beginnings in Africa, after barely 25 years of our presence, with many situations still evolving and implying also an emotional involvement for all of us who were part of it;
- On the other hand, a simple chronological list of facts without any comment is meaningless: what is the use of listing a series of dates, names of people and places without gaining at least some little lesson for life?
- But, if I want to give some interpretation of the facts, this would be based almost only on my personal experience, biased by my point of view. To really “read the facts, there would be need to hear other voices, and have our narrations compared by an external person who could venture in giving a more objective evaluation of the facts.

In short: it is not yet time for history. It is too early to write a history of the arrival of the Don Guanella Works to Africa, and this shall be written in future by other persons.

Really, this should rather be the “time of memories”, time to collect what the living witnesses of those beginning can remember. These pages therefore want to be also an invitation to all the confreres of the first hours to write down some remembrance of the first encounter between Don Guanella and Africa.

It is an invitation to all the European confreres involved at the beginning (Ezio Canzi, Giancarlo Frigerio, Adriano Folonaro, Giampiero Porrini, Guido Matarrese, Wladimiro Bogoni, Fernando De La Torre) but also, with strength, to the African confreres who had contact with the congregation before we had a stable presence of confreres in Africa (Christopher Obiagba, Benedict Onyema, Christopher Orji, Kelechi Maduforo, Charles Makanka, Bernardin Mbaya). It would be very nice and useful if all these confreres could write down some memory of those days, recalling their first approach and the first steps of their contact with the congregation.

What then? Should I abandon for now the idea of saying something about the beginning of the African adventure of the Don Guanella Works? Is it really impossible to give some data and encourage a reflection on missionary expansion, in view of the 25th anniversary and even more with the perspective of a whole new generation of African confreres who must on their turn expand the mission and implant the charism? What should I do?

I decided to tell something only about the first choices, leaving for a future time the telling of the first steps and the development. Therefore I focused this little work only on the period preceding the establishment of the Guanellians in Africa, looking at the entire period of preparation until 1992, ending with the institution of the first Guanellian community in Africa, at Nnebukwu.

I will present facts and documents of how the congregation of the Servants of Charity, in the late eighties of the past century, decided to take a leap toward the African continent. I will also try to present the first steps following the decision, some of the persons involved and some of the general reactions of the confreres in Italy.

Observing the process of preparation will give us the opportunity to remember with gratitude some important people who – we could say – have been our fathers, such as the confreres don Maurizio Bianchi e don Domenico Saginario and the Bishop of Owerri Mons. Mark Unegbu. We will also have the opportunity to see and think about ideas, motivations, and strategies for the expansion of the Works. In a period when the African delegation needs to continue expanding the Guanellian Works, recalling these ideas and strategies may help us for the present and the future.

1. Looking at Africa from afar (from the Founder until 1980).

a. The Founder.

For this first part I will have continuous reference to the good article “Don Guanella Missionario” published by Fr. Adriano Folonaro on the “Progetto Africa” in 2014. It is a simple but well documented. In this article Fr. Adriano recalls the youthful desires for missionary life in the history of our founder¹. We could think that Luigi Guanella, for his gifts of nature and grace, should have since the beginning vast horizons in life. While being strongly attached to his valley and his people, since his early years his views and his interests were going beyond the peaks of his mountains. He was aware of other worlds and other peoples, and soon started being aware of their spiritual and material needs. Yet, Africa seems to be absent from his thoughts for many years.

In his early years the *child Luigi* experienced directly, starting from his village and his own family, the situation of those who had to migrate to Switzerland, France, and especially to America, where millions of Italians were going to look for work during those decades.

His first hand acquaintance with relatives and co-villagers who had to leave, together with the comments of mama Maria about those “poor protestants” living in Switzerland, surely fostered in him a special interest for the spiritual well-being of people in those distant lands. This interest remained in him for long, so much that, towards the end of his life, he travelled to the United States to prepare a place for his Daughters of St. Mary of Providence.

As a *young seminarian* Luigi Guanella asked his Bishop to join the Seminary of “Foreign Missions” in Milan. This Institute, just as several others that were sprouting in Europe in the second half of the 19th century, was preparing missionaries especially for *Asia*. The choice for Asia was due to the difficulties found by European missionaries in Africa, where climate and lack of adequate drugs were giving a hope of only few years of activity for the young priests who were sent there: very many were dying of fevers, many others had to be repatriated because of sickness and weariness. The average span of activity of a missionary in Africa was not up to five years. Moreover, while in this period the European powers were only painfully contacting the African areas beyond the coast line, the same powers were opening up wide trading and diplomatic spaces within China, where the climate and social situations were making life somehow easier for Europeans. There was a promising spreading of the Evangelical message in quite large parts of that huge population, and there was great need of young priests who, with a better hope of survival, would have time to enter such a distant culture and society in order to evangelise.

The young Guanella’s application (no document has been found, but many have recalled it and we should consider it certain) was not accepted by Bishop Marzorati, worried for the needs of his own diocese.

Later on, the *young priest* Guanella was for some years a disciple of Don Bosco, who repeatedly invited him to widen the horizon of his mission towards *Latin America*. This time Don Guanella was the one who turned down the invitation: in those years of on-going

¹ Cf.: Folonaro A. “Don Guanella missionario” in *Progetto Africa* n.59(2014) Pagg. 8 - 27

discernment searching for his true vocation, he thought that his way was to pass through his homeland and his Diocese, before expanding elsewhere.

As a *founder* finally, in 1902, when his charitable institutions were already established and expanding, he had several dialogues with church authorities he met in the Holy land during his pilgrimage. He spoke of possible foundations in the *Middle East* at Beirut, Damask, Jerusalem, and even some dream seemed to come close to reality at Bethlehem, but even this time there was no practical outcome. The fruit of Providence brought by in this pilgrimage was rather the beginning of the Works in Rome, with the purchase of the Colonia of Monte Mario.

What we could mention as the first “call” to Don Guanella from Africa was in the year 1904. According to Fr. Folonaro:

*After several invitations by Mons. Ghaly, Vicar General of Alexandria in Egypt and of a British colonel to open a Work, don Guanella concluded: “I am so sorry that the harvest is large, but the workers few. May the Lord look at our good desires: and for now let us pray and hope that others will do, after us, what was not granted us to do”. Don Guanella had this idea particularly vivid when three Bishops from Egypt (the Patriarch of Alexandria, the Bishop of Thebe, and another Bishop) went to visit the Agricultural Establishment of Monte Mario in Rome (1904) and told him of their desire to have such a type of work in their country. “And he felt his desire rekindled to run at the aid of those poor missionary Bishops”.*²

This time the situation was somehow different: the object of the call was not the man Guanella, but the Work he had started. Yet we could imagine that, while the man was by now mature, the Work was still “infant”, not yet grown – in numbers and organisation – to the point of making such a leap to the other shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Once more, the answer could not come.

Nevertheless, Don Guanella’s interest for foreign missions continued. He was keeping it alive himself within the environment of his Houses through the bulletin “La Divina Provvidenza” and in the frequents short speeches, as many gave witness in the canonisation process. Among the many missionaries with whom he kept contacts, Fr. Folonaro recalls: Card. Massaia in Ethiopia,

*P. Antonio Tettamanzi from Como (1853-1885), missionary at Abeokuta-Lagos, in Nigeria; Mons. Daniele Comboni (1831-1881), the apostle of Black People; Fr. Ludovico Antonelli (1863-1927), bishop of Leptis Magna and first Apostolic Vicar in Libya; ...; don Biagio Verri (1819-1884), the “apostle of African girls”; Fr. Rodolfo Fasola from Brunate, who joined the Missioni Estere.*³

² *Ibidem* p. 18

³ *Ibid.* p. 25

b. **The early stages of the congregation.**

i. **World War I and 1st post-war period (1915 – 1923):**

I have no documents showing any evidence of a special interest of Don Bacciarini, the first successor of Don Guanella, for a missionary expansion of the congregation. We could easily assume that the saintly follower of St. Guanella could have interest to take charity all over the world. Surely, circumstances prevented him even to think of crossing the oceans.

The difficult financial and disciplinary situation of a congregation that was not yet approved by Rome, the terrible World War I going on in Europe, and later the problems he had to face when, barely a year after taking charge, he was appointed Bishop of Lugano, joined with his worrying state of health and declining strength, could not allow him to go beyond a particular attention to his country, Switzerland, where he actually made provision for the opening of new Works.

ii. **The Mazzuchi years: (1924 – 1946)**

The twenty-two years tenure of Fr. Leonardo Mazzucchi as Superior (we could easily add three preceding years and six after as Vicar, with a total of more than thirty years of governance) are usually seen as a period of “putting things in order”. The special feature or programme of this period appears the will and effort to channel the Spirit into Rules.

Actually, I think this is a reductive vision which does not give a comprehensive and correct evaluation of that long period of time.

Reading the pages of *Charitas* and reviewing the general council’s decisions of those years, I think we could recognise a double movement of impulses given by the council for the congregation’s growth: together with a movement to deepen the reasons of the Work, firmly attached to the Church doctrine on religious life (Church norms, the Rule) and to the Founder’s spirit (attention to formation, re-organisation of the Houses), the new council seemed to want also a movement of expansion, trying to extend branches to do good in new areas, reaching also America, and on the *Charitas* Don Mazzucchi was often inviting to pray and work for America and ... for other places of missions.⁴

A typical example of this second sense of movement is the sudden “transplantation” of the Work to South America, at Tandil in Argentina, in 1925. On December 30th, 1924 – barely ten months after taking office – the general council unanimously approves Don Mazzucchi’s proposal of attempting a foundation in Argentina, in an area where many families had migrated from Pianello years earlier.⁵

It could be interesting to study better the reasons founding this decision of opening foundations in South America. Why should a Congregation that was not yet approved by the Vatican, that had just overcome a trouble period of trials to find a leadership, with several

⁴ Cf. *Charitas* n. 16(1926) p. 11; n. 59(1937) p.24; n.61(1938) p. 3; n. 62(1938) p. 1-4

⁵ Cf. Bouvier, Cao *L’espansione missionaria guanelliana in Argentina*. In “Figlie di S.M. della Provvidenza e Servi della Carità nei vent’anni successivi alla morte del Fondatore” (Nuove Frontiere, Saggi Storici n. 17) Roma 2003. pp. 295-320

confreres who were abandoning because of different views about the style of life and mission ... why should such a congregation decide to attempt such a “jump”? And why deciding to go to America, rather than, for example, to other European countries? We could attempt some immediate possible answers, even if more deepening should be needed to better clarify the circumstances. Possible reasons are:

- a) The *spirit of the Founder*, continuously recalled to the confreres by Don Mazzucchi, surely was urging to always go farther, with his idea that “we can never stop ...”. on the other hand, he had given the example himself following the steps of Italian migrants when he sent his Sisters to U.S.A.
- b) Some social and politic *difficulties in Italy*: in 1924 the fascist regime had taken absolute power and its position was still a bit far from the Church. This could induce church institutions to look for foundations abroad, as possible places of refuge in case of persecutions against congregations, as it had happened in quite recent times in Germany and France, and as it was happening in Mexico at the time.
- c) The *desire to give wider fields of activity to the confreres*: the congregation had just closed a difficult period, the years immediately after WWI (1919 – 1924), with the disputes about the “San Gaetano” institute at Milan, confreres who had been soldiers and were leaving the congregation, disagreement between those who supported a real unity in a congregation and those supporting a simple “bond of charity” making each house (and each superior) independent in choices about the activity. It could even appear that the most active and enterprising confreres had left, and surely there was need of a new boost of the activities, avoiding the risk of making things dull by simply insisting on rules and uniformity of religious life. In this sense, opening a new frontier could act as a powerful factor of union and awakening of fervour in those who remained.
- d) The *personal influence* of Don Mazzucchi himself. He had direct acquaintance with the persons from Pianello who were inviting the congregation to America, and was a man of vast horizons, often writing and speaking about expansion to America, Asia, Africa.

For the entire following period, until World War II, Don Mazzucchi kept trying to give impulse to the growth of the Works outside Italy, not only by following closely the Works’ growth in Argentina, but voicing out his desire for further steps of expansion. Some passages of his articles on Charitas are real exhortations to take a leap towards mission in Africa and Asia.⁶ He also received and considered some applications for our presence in Brazil⁷.

In 1936, when Italy had occupied Ethiopia and was trying to colonise it, within the general council the idea was discussed to open a community at Addis Ababa for the spiritual care of Italian families that were to move from Italy to Ethiopia⁸. The procedure had no positive outcome, and this could also be a point to be studied, to understand the reasons of this missed development.

⁶Cf. *Charitas* n.61(1938) p. 3

⁷ Cf. Dieguez *I progetti e gli interventi di governo dei Servi della Carità*. In “Figlie di S.M. della Provvidenza e Servi della Carità nei vent’anni successivi alla morte del Fondatore” (Nuove Frontiere, Saggi Storici n. 17) Roma 2003. pp. 160-163

⁸ Cf. Dieguez *I progetti e gli interventi di governo dei Servi della Carità*. In “Figlie di S.M. della Provvidenza e Servi della Carità nei vent’anni successivi alla morte del Fondatore” (Nuove Frontiere, Saggi Storici n. 17) Roma 2003. p. 163- 164 [the date “13 giugno 1932” is to be corrected to “13 giugno 1936”]

iii. After World War II (1946 – 1964)

The early years after WWII, when Fr. Luigi Alippi was the General Superior, witnessed a great impulse of expansion of the Guanellian Works. Works were growing in number and potentials of services, at the same time the number of confreres was growing, on the wave of the blooming vocations in Italy during that period.

But this expansion of the Works was at the end intensive rather than extensive: larger houses were built, new houses were open not far from those already present ... Italy was passing through a difficult process of reconstruction after the war, and was full of needy requiring the attention of many resources if not all.

As soon as the most urgent needs in Italy were met, Fr. Alippi addressed his attention also abroad and to new areas, but the privileged area for “foreign” missions remained America, both the South (where new presences were open in Brazil and Chile) and the North (U.S.A.). Scores of Italian confreres were sent to work there, and this tendency continued with the following General Superiors, Frs. De Ambroggi and Budino, both of them appointed superior while they were on mission in South America, therefore fostering a special attention for the needs of that area.

We could say that, for about forty years, in the Guanellian family “missions land” was synonymous with America.

iv. Echoes of the Founder’s Beatification (1964 – 1981)

The event of the Beatification of Don Guanella, which took place while Council Vatican II was on, before many bishops coming from all over the world, brought some attention – no matter how limited – towards Africa.

Among the 14 congratulatory letters from African Bishops, the Papal Nuncio to Congo, Rwanda and Burundi wrote that he would have been “*very happy, if one day I will have the gift of greeting his Sons in the new African communities*”⁹.

Just a few months earlier there had been another interesting contact with Africa. In 1963 a new hospital was built at Katana in Kivu (Congo) with the help of the city of Como. A wing of the hospital was named after the then Venerable Don Luigi Guanella. The President of Como Province asked the General Superior for a picture of the Founder to be hung at the wall¹⁰. Who knows whether that picture is still there?

Among the events following the Beatification there was the Guanellian Pilgrimage to the Holy Land, organised in 1966 to remember the centenary of Don Guanella’s ordination, and also his own pilgrimage in 1902. The very day of the anniversary, May 26th, the General Superior and some confreres had a meeting with the Apostolic Delegate for the Holy Land, and the chronicle of the pilgrimage notes that *this was an exception for our pilgrimage, and we were grateful for that.*¹¹ While not having any evidence, it is possible that already at that point some words might have been exchanged about a presence of our Works in the Holy

⁹ *Charitas* n.144(1965) p.43

¹⁰ *Charitas* n.139(1963) p.9

¹¹ *Charitas* n.150(1966) inserto speciale “Terra Santa” p.14

Land. The official letter of invitation was later sent to the new Superior in 1972 and, after a series of dialogues, bureaucratic procedures and preparations, the house of Nazareth, the first Guanellian house outside Europe or America, was opened in 1975.¹²

¹² *Charitas* n.173(1975) p.10, 13

2. Slowly getting closer: 1981 – 1988

a. “...beyond our usual horizon”, the first invitations.

At the beginning of the Eighties the Guanellian congregation went through a difficult moment. The process of reviewing the Constitutions required by Council Vatican II was on, and the 12th General Chapter had given clear indications that the congregation was to review all her Works to give them a new (and reduced) dimension. At this point the General Superior, Fr. Olimpio Giampedraglia suddenly fell sick with cancer and, after some months of a real calvary of suffering, died at the beginning of December 1980.

The 13th General Chapter was called in July 1981 to appoint the new superior and council and to see what to do about the new Constitutions. This was a chapter of substance and ideas. Few decisions were taken, but there was an important and deep reflection, and definitions and ideas about the congregation’s charism and mission were given. The fundamental contributions of Frs. Beria, Pellegrini, Saginario, Credaro, Minetti produced documents that would become the foundation of the following years’ work, until 1984/85 when the Special Chapter approved the new Constitutions.

Before closing this chapter of “principles and ideas”, a few practical motions were seen, which had been presented by some confreres. Among the approved ones, there was the following:

The Chapter Assembly points out for the General Government, as an element of its programme, the possibility to take our Guanellian presence in some other Country where poverty is joined with vocations fecundity.¹³

It was just an impulse to move on, and later it was used to open the mission in Mexico. Yet, an observation is interesting: in spite of internal problems such as the fact of those who – in our Institute as in others – were abandoning religious and priestly life, and the decreasing vocations in Italy, in spite of the widespread need to reduce the confreres’ workload to allow the communities to “stop and think” about the new Constitutions, the Chapter wanted to keep a door open to the charism expansion. The motion doesn’t include any motivation for this directive, which is included “as an element of its programme”, but only two criteria: poverty and possibility of persons managing (local vocations). These are criteria we will see repeated, better expressed and explained, later on.

Another type of invitation came in 1984 when Fr. Piero Pellegrini, Provincial Superior of the Northern Italy – Switzerland Province, wrote a note on the bulletin “Informazioni”. It was in preparation for a very important provincial chapter, marking the final steps of the long process of reviewing the Constitutions.

We proclaimed it for years, and wrote it in many documents: our first commitment, our mission, typically Guanellian, is for the poorest. Those who are here around us and to whom we devote our work are really poor and need our help, even if it could be difficult to declare that they are surely the poorest. There are many others, close to us, that we are not able to help, except at most for some act of solidarity.

¹³ *Charitas* n.190(1982) p. 22

I don't know whether it is too much if I invite you to widen our remembrance and a possible act of solidarity somehow beyond our usual horizon, in order to avoid blushing for embarrassment when we will decide to do some works and some expenditures, surely useful and even necessary, in our houses.

I would like to recall briefly the extreme misery in which many peoples are more and more sinking, because of world economic crisis and for other climatic, political, military causes.

The opportunity for this comes from a repeated call for help from the "Comitato Amici del Mozambico": it is one of the many situations that are increasing in number here and there: [...long quotation from the letter "...drought and war... in some places 50% of the population has died ... thousands of dead in the second half of 1983 ... every morning a tractor goes through the city to collect the corpses ..."]

Immediately other memories come about situations in Latin America, especially Central America, East Asia, the African Sahel...

If in your house you receive the bulletin of the Italian Caritas (Italia Caritas) or other magazines open to the third world problems, you can read endless news.

Probably many communities receive the magazine "Settimana" which in the past issues has reported repeatedly about the tragedy of the Sahel:

n. 16 – The tragedy of thirsting Sahel

n. 17 – The Sahel demands a different development

n. 19 – How to fight against hunger (Sahel: Chad, Upper Volta, Ghana...)

I think there is need to call all to think about this tragedy; maybe we can do something; surely the response should not be given only by the provincial council, but by the whole Province.

In a similar situation, or rather, in a less serious one... Our director, who, while in Palestine two years ago, had to give up the desired trip to Egypt for the cholera, felt again his desire enkindled to run at the aid of those poor missionary Bishops." (La Divina Provvidenza 1904, pag. 156).

Obviously, the director that is mentioned is don Guanella.¹⁴

The answer of the 5th Provincial Chapter was fast and clear, with a motion approved on June 26th, 1984: we were ready to give some money, and to give it in a regular way, but there was no talking of involving people. The Province continued to think that our duty was to follow our poor, in our houses in Northern Italy. The motion read:

The Chapter decides, as a sign of sharing with the poorest, that each House will give, for the coming three years, 0.5% of the gross income to be paid in every six months for the benefit of the populations more in need (Sahel, Mozambique ...).¹⁵

The chapter decision was approved with 45 "placet" out of 49 voters. Most probably, those against it were not disapproving the fact of giving to the poor or the fact of working in mission lands, they simply thought that, according to the tradition going on for decades, our responsibility was to serve and help South America, while other types of help for emergency

¹⁴ "Informazioni" giugno 1984 – p. 7-8

¹⁵ Informazioni, 1984 – p. 26

situations were to be considered sporadic and not regular. Yet we shall see that exactly this motion will give the start to an important mechanism, because it introduced a regular income (the houses were supposed to pay in every six months) to be spent in this way, for charitable projects outside the province. This percentage was the financial foundation of the future expansion, and still now is the institutional support to the Works in Africa.

To be true, at the beginning, the ideal of “widening the horizon” that was founding this decision seemed to be almost nullified: the answer of the superior general and his council sounded almost as a ... call back home! In his letter of September 13th, 1984, approving what the Provincial Chapter had done, the superior general wrote:

*... The only note to be remarked is about the chapter decision to give 0.5% of the gross income of each House in benefit of the populations who have more difficulties.*¹⁶

The General Council was suggesting, about this, some practical ways to collect the money and to use it after deliberation of the provincial council, with specific projects, and making them known to the confreres, then they added:

*In this context, the General Council reminds of the serious financial difficulties also in the Latin American Countries where our Congregation is present, and advises that in distributing these contributions some projects of our Latin American Houses, in situations of urgent need, should be supported.*¹⁷

It was – once more – America!

We have no published reactions of the province to this advice. Probably the provincial council helped also some of our American houses, but also acted independently. Thus, at the end of 1986 they sent a substantial help (more or less what was collected in two years, which means what the chapter decision was recommending) to support an agricultural project of the Church in Sudan.

The following provincial chapter, rather than closing the experience, increased the percentage to 1% of the gross income of each house, and this was clearly done to answer the invitation of the general council (to help our houses) without removing our interest from other lands: the following year money was sent to our Centre at Bucaramanga in Colombia, but also to another congregation’s project in Ivory Coast.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Informazioni*, 1984 – p.15

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Informazioni*, marzo 1989 – p. 30

b. “A delicate phase of *implantatio*” – the opening from the centre (1981 – 1988)

The General council elected in the 1981 chapter essentially continued with the same composition until 1993: with the superior Fr. Pietro Pasquali, Frs. Minetti, Gridelli, and Ottaviano remained together members of the council for almost the whole of the 12 years. This council started a prudent but steady widening of the congregation’s horizons. Already Fr. Olimpio Giampedraglia had opened the house of Nazareth in 1975. In 1983 the first confreres were sent to Mexico City, opening a community again in the American continent, but with a style of foundation quite different compared to the preceding ones, in other countries.

On the fest of St. Joseph 1985, while the process of preparation of the new Constitutions was coming to an end, the superior general Fr. Pasquali wrote in his letter about a problem which

was worrying already Don Guanella at the very beginning of his work of merciful charity. This is how he himself exposes it in “La Divina Provvidenza”: “the Little House in this 1894 is dominated by two different sentiments: the first is to stabilise a fixed point to better consolidate in an orderly manner what has been just sketched so far. The second thought is a strong impulse to extend and develop at the same time the Work, always relying on the increasing help of divine Providence which, when a work of edification is started, hardly accepts for it not to be completed; and when a road is opened, rarely does not want it to be travelled on, because it is the Lord’s way”(anno 1894, p. 123). Throughout his life, Don Guanella kept questioning about the choice to be done between the two directions [...] we also do – and always will – find ourselves facing this choice that can take dramatic tones: prudence on one side, forcing us to take into account our limits and our real possibilities, and on the other side the more and more pressing demands and situations of extreme need; on one side a slow action not always or not totally justified, on the other side the call of Christ charity pointing us new goals and asking for acts of courage. What answer can we give? What will make us calm, when God will call us to give account? I ask for a special prayer from all, that God may enlighten us in discerning, step after step, the journey the congregation is called to go on.¹⁹

The two different sentiments, the desire to “do better” by consolidating the Works, and the desire to “do more” by expanding on new frontiers, are always present, they are part of the daily dialectics of our life, and all of us are at home with them. Maybe on a lower tune and on less important choices, each Guanellian religious and each community has to make choices: should we open a new service people are asking for? ... should we accept that particular inmate what his workload? ... should we spend a particular amount to improve the structures, or to increase the number of residents? ...

This time, the dilemma was expressed at the highest directive level of the congregation, by the superior general, in a period when – even in religious life – authorities were sometimes ... lacking authority ... and were trying to play a role of stimulation of the confreres rather than imposing their choices.

¹⁹ *Charitas* 195 – p. 12

It is difficult to say which were the positions within the general council, where maybe nobody was totally in favour of the “doing better” nor of the “doing more”, but everybody was trying to make a good discernment for each case and situation.

Something clearer we could probably say about the Italian provinces. The Roman Province was certainly more advanced in giving impulse to the movement for extension: after having the charge of the houses in the U.S.A., the Province was charged with the foundation in Mexico and was already looking beyond. The Province of Northern Italy - Switzerland, on the other hand, was more occupied facing the many problems caused by the social changes at the time. There was no more great need for services for boys, while the needs were much increasing for old people and the disable, and this required many adjustments to the buildings and organisation in the houses, in a period when there were almost no vocations and some confreres were leaving. Moreover, the provincial Fr. Piero Pellegrini, a man of great intelligence and spirit, capable of clear and profound analyses, and with the courage to present ideas and ideals, was more and more physically impaired by Parkinson disease. He was finally able to attain the end of his long tenure only thanks to his superior gifts of intelligence, great effort, spirit of sacrifice.

Soul and fire of the expansion movement was Fr. Domenico Saginario, “homeland missionary” of our congregation. He spent almost the whole of his priestly life in Rome, first as a teacher and then rector of the theological seminary, later as provincial superior, general councillor, and again provincial superior. Only towards the end of his life he got permission to go to Manila in the Philippines, where he died suddenly at age eighty, almost at the eve of the Founder’s canonisation.

He was the one who gave impulse to the first “long jump” of the congregation, towards India. A good theologian, he had a very clear idea of what was the real meaning of expansion. It was not simply a matter of going for a *missio*, i.e. going to a new place and start doing good according to the Guanellian style and tradition. The matter was to set up an *implantatio*: going to a new place and transplant the charism, i.e. explain by words, actions, life, to some members of the local population Don Guanella’s perceptions and intuitions, our style of work and organisation, the spirit of our personal and community life, so that they could make it their own, take it up and carry it on.

His was a continuous stimulation to “go beyond”, to the point that, even when – some years later – everybody was insisting on “consolidation”, the Operational Plan of his Province read:

*... follow with the highest care the delicate phase of the “implantation” of our charism in India and Mexico today, and in Madagascar, Poland, etc. ... in future.*²⁰

We could note that the countries mentioned are in four different continents ... the Roman Province at the time could count only on about 100 confreres, some quite old, others sick, many overloaded with work ...

Thanks to his particular position, close to the Roman Universities, and to his personal sensitivity, Don Domenico was the first link between the centre of the congregation and what we call today African Delegation. He was not the seed, but rather the pollen, that cause life to sprout and disappears before seeing the fruit.

²⁰ *Documenti della IV Consulta Generale. Quaderni del Charitas n. 24. Roma 1997 – p. 154*

c. **“The charism is catholic” – A choice is made in Rome (1988)**

After the 1987 General Chapter, during the first of the yearly encounters of the general council with the provincial superiors, the issue of missionary expansion was openly put in the agenda. The minutes of that meeting have an important page:

The involvement of all the Provinces in the missionary expansion has been accepted by all as a duty of faithfulness to the charism, of communion and co-responsibility, beyond being a favouring factor for exchange of experiences and opportunities of meetings among those in charge.

- *We made a reflection on whether such expansion is legitimate:*
 - *the charism we received is catholic [universal], it has been given for the entire Church,*
 - *charity cannot have geographical boundaries, she runs where needs are calling,*
 - *the example of the Founder.*

- *We defined the criteria for our movement in this area:*
 - *there should be the call*
 - *together with poverty so succour, there should be possibility of having vocations,*
 - *for the moment, the expansion should not involve personnel except for those needed to keep the contacts, and should not worry about opening Works*
 - *it should be done in the line of closeness with other countries where we are already, in view of immediate help*
 - *the vocations that could grow should be well cared for.*

- *Finally, precise geographical areas have been assigned to individual Provinces, for them to consolidate our presence there or try to implant it. They are:*
 - *To the Northern Italy Province, which already includes Switzerland and Spain, is assigned Israel and one African country to be chosen after appropriate inquiries.²¹*

This was no more time for suggestions or invitations, it was a clear mandate, given at the highest levels of government of the congregation. The new provincial, Don Maurizio Bianchi, was going back to Como with the task of putting Africa in his programme.

I think it could be good to stop a moment and make some reflection: first of all, from the documents we are reading every decision apparently comes from the centre and is later passed on or even imposed to the confreres. Actually, the movement was much wider. Here we are only reading the official documents, and these usually contain the final outcome of dialogue and discussion among confreres, complaints and suggestions, interactions between “the government” and “the ranks”. Sometime later, Don Maurizio himself will recall how

²¹ Verbali Consiglio Generale, Nov. 1988

*For some time the desire was present, among the confreres, to step out on new frontiers. As if answering, the general council gathered in Rome the past November with the provincials of all the provinces, invited us to a more evident missionary dimension.*²²

A more important reflection should be made on the procedure followed. Even in a highly synthetic expression, the minutes reveal that a well articulated procedure of discernment was implemented. The choice in favour of an expansion of the Works is made only after posing precise questions, and giving specific answers. The confreres were well aware that in a congregation no one is allowed to act only on the wave of sentiments or personal aspirations or desires. As guardians and animators of Don Guanella's charism, they had to make sure not to betray his spirit, not to force it, not to numb it. This is why the first pose a question about motivations, then one about method.

1. The first question was, "do we have the right to leave for missions?" (*whether such expansion is legitimate*). The underlying discussion for this question – which was a hot issue in those years of "going back to the foundations of the original charism" – was the fact that "we are not a missionary institute". Often it was said that the "missio ad gentes" was not among our institutional aims. In those years the general views in the Church were still strongly euro-centred, and the idea of mission was still linked to the pattern of European religious leaving to preach and foster development in the "third world" countries. Even missionary institutes were finding it hard to accept vocations of non-European aspirants, and among congregations with social and educational activity the importance was not yet clear to play a specific role in each local church.

Very appropriately, the answer given by the general council in union with the provincial was not based on juridical reasons nor on opportunities to catch, not even on evaluation of social needs of help. The answer to the question, which was "expansion is legitimate", was at a theological and spiritual level, and was founded on three types of motivations:

- a. Ecclesial: in any part of the world, where there is Church, we can and should go with our charism.
 - b. Charismatic: who can separate humanity (or any particular portion of humanity) from the love of Christ (see Rom. 8:35)? Charity is expansive in itself, and charity is the centre of our charism.
 - c. Traditional: the Guanellian adage *we can never stop*.
2. Once defined the right – and duty? – for the congregation to expand its Works to other countries and continents, the criteria for this expansion were fixed. It was a practical issue, but very important in order to have a final outcome that would not betray the aim: the provinces were invited to move in the same way, with a similar pace. Therefore some criteria were set about the method.

We could interestingly note that, while the last three criteria (using few persons, choosing places close to where we already are, taking care of vocations) were in view of efficacy and lined to the situation of the time, with scarcity of confreres and not enough experience about expansion, the first two criteria on the contrary are more

²² *Informazioni*, Agosto 1989, p. 3

general and they are linked to the motivations for the expansion, therefore more universal.

- a. The charism is by nature a gift made by the Spirit for the service of the Church, therefore it should be implanted when and where there is a *call* by the Church, usually manifested through her institutional system (Bishops, priests, church institutions):
- b. The charism is *servicing a particular portion of the people*, at the local level, therefore has to be carried on by persons who know and belong to the geographical area: this is the criterion guiding the need for local Guanellian vocations. These are persons who can imbibe the charism and express it in their own culture. The care for local vocations is not only the answer to a “quantitative” need of staff to work in the new area, but most especially to the “qualitative” need to adjust the Works, originated by one charism, to the different areas. Even if it is not openly stated, this criterion is nothing else than the beginning of the idea that it is necessary to inculturate the charism.

3. Setting the machine in motion: 1989 – 1992

a. “We are pleased to welcome” – The echo and the first moves

How did the decision resound in the Province? And what type of movement – if any – took off?

We can easily follow the reactions and the moves especially through two sources: the Minutes of the Provincial Council (Verbale Consiglio Provinciale – VCP) and the official bulletin “Informazioni”.

Back from the meeting in Rome, Don Maurizio gives his report to the provincial council at the beginning of December, and we can read in the minutes the reaction:

About missionary expansion, we are pleased to welcome the coupling of our Province with Africa, from where we already have some invitations from bishops and we could also have confreres who are available and appropriate.²³

So, there was satisfaction and good will to act among the councillors, even if nothing specific is pointed out, waiting for further information.

After the Christmas period, Don Maurizio begins collecting pieces of information on the possible perspectives, and reports at the beginning of February:

In Rome, the Provincial gathered some information and perspectives for a presence of our province in Africa: a discussion follows, and the direction is given toward an area of French influence and language, rather than English (Cote d’Ivoire rather than Nigeria); but don Maurizio will gather more news.²⁴

So there were various possibilities and perhaps different opinions on how to move practically. The inclination for Cote d’Ivoire or any French-speaking country was probably inspired by the fact that the great majority of confreres in that period had learned some French language during their studies, and in any case, cultural differences were supposed to be less pronounced between “Latin sisters”. Surely these were not motivations good enough to make a choice, that is why Don Maurizio endeavoured to collect more information.

This arrived in March, once more from Rome, and rather specific. Much work had already been made by the provincial of Rome, Don Domenico Saginario, who wrote on Easter Monday this letter to his colleague in Como:

Rome, March 20, 1989

Dearest don Maurizio,

I wish the climate and the grace of the Easter we just celebrated [??? Easter was March 26] will fully imbibe your spirit and your work. I would like to extend the expression of greeting and wishes to all the members of the Council: don Piero, don Paolo, don Adriano, don Giancarlo. May the Lord give you health and joy.

I am writing you to hand over, little by little the missionary work about Africa, in particular for Nigeria.

²³ Verbale Consiglio Provinciale (VCP) 06/12/1988

²⁴ VCP 00/02/1989

1. THE GENERAL SITUATION

The exchange of mail began last year. The spark came from a vocational advert published by don Luigi De Giambattista on a youth magazine (*The Catholic Reader's Digest*) that reaches also several English-speaking countries. I received two letters from Nigeria, one from Transvaal, another from Sierra Leone. A dialogue started also with Madagascar, but didn't continue.

This exchange of mail, while growing with Nigeria, had no development with other countries. Moreover, to avoid an excessive widening of the front, I had not responded to some applications that were too isolated. Recently a young man from Sierra Leone repeated his application: he wrote a first time to the USA; then, directed by don Luigi De G. Battista he reached me the past October and I didn't answer. Now he has written again: his intention is to become a Brother; for the moment he would like to know our Work better and is therefore asking for informative materials. I have not yet answered him.

The bulk of applications, therefore, come from young men from Nigeria.

2. NIGERIA

I had several moments of dialogue with a Nigerian Priest who is our guest at the Theological Seminary. His name is Fr. ANTHONY NJOKU. Very good and in a year, after his studies, he will go back to the Owerri Major Seminary. He affirms he will be happy to help us.

I also had several meetings with another Nigerian Priest, a Claretian religious, who was living in front of us, on the Aurelia Nuova: his name is Fr. PAUL UCHENNA OKOLI, he has finished his studies at Gregoriana and has gone back home in February: having known with appreciation our Work in Via Aurelia, he has said he is available to be Vocations Promoter for us in Nigeria, since he has been vocations promoter also for his Congregation. That is why he took about 50 of our leaflets in English and other materials.

These priests suggested for us to contact especially the Bishops of the Western[sic] region (OWERRI – ONITSHA area), because, among the three ecclesiastical regions which make up Nigeria (North, East, West) the Western[sic] has the highest Catholic percentage and it is the most open to vocation response. There are three Major Seminaries. There aren't many Religious institutes, and the need is felt. We already have good co-operators.

3. ADDRESSES

I attach the addresses of the bishops and of Fr. P. Okoli and of each young man I am following. I attach letters, document sent by the young men and the description of the situation as it has evolved till now. I am now expecting the "confidential" answers from the people I involved (parish priests, seminary superiors, others) in order to have the essential elements for a judgment on the candidates. From these inquiries the green or red light should result on whether to continue or not.

Once such information reaches, then there is need to move to decide a programme.

4. PROGRAMME

I would say: three steps appear important. The contact with the bishops. A first trip for exploration. Welcoming a few young men, the most certain, to start.

1. The contact with the Bishops

You could begin with the Bishops of Owerri and Onitsha. You find their addresses in the attached list. The one of Owerri is well known to our Fr. Anthony, who is apparently already in contact with him. In your letter you could propose the hypothesis of a trip – visit to be done at the opportune time.

2. The exploratory journey

Before accepting the young candidates, I think it is essential to visit the place to see them, evaluate their personality at direct sight and gather impressions. Another objective is also important: to have some students accepted in the diocesan seminaries, to avoid the risk of sending them directly to Italy, which would be too big a risk.

About the moment: useful should be the end of June, beginning of July, to send to Rome on time a few young men who could be ready. Of course, the weather is very hot in July; but it is the right period of the vocational camps and acceptance into seminaries.

3. Accepting some candidates

Once the contacts for information are over, there is need to meet the young men, do some kind of interview, spend some time with them, maybe know their families and speak directly with their superiors (parish priest, lecturers, seminary superior if they are former seminarians). These meetings would widen much our experience. It would also be a good foundation of good relationship and valorisation of our Works.

Finally, there will be need to help them for the documents, the passport and the VISA.

These should be the steps to do, in my opinion. Nevertheless, now it's good for you to start holding the threads to be woven, especially in order to enter little by little in this world of cultures almost totally new for us.

Feel absolutely free to tell me where I can help more, or if I can step back to face other fronts that, as you know, are already quite large.

And wishing you and the whole Northern Italy Province the warmest wishes for a productive Guanellian outcome, I express much fraternity. With joy and respect for your value. Tuo aff.mo

Don Domenico Saginario²⁵

Surely Don Domenico had given time and energies for the cause of opening up to Africa. Probably he had little opportunity to deepen his knowledge on the cultures and even the geography of the place (see for example the confusion between East and West, or the idea that July should be the hottest month, or the idea of vocational camps similar to those made in Italy ...). But surely his work was done with method, combining enthusiastic vision and prudent inquiry. I would like to point out the sentence towards the end of the letter: “tell me where I can help more, or if I can step back ...”. As it always happened, for all his many contributions to the congregation's life, Don Domenico was ready to surrender all to somebody else without any regret, in simplicity and joy.

The letter was happily welcomed by the council, but already the first minutes show some indications that differentiate somehow the line of expansion chosen by Northern Italy from the one proposed by Don Domenico.

The decision is to take into consideration the possibility offered in Nigeria, preferable to other African countries, contact the bishops, highlighting the

²⁵ VCP 17/04/1989

*first preoccupation for a service to the poor in the area. The prevision is to welcome the young men who could come for a first trial period at Barza (contact with the community, old people, and Italian language) then the beginning of the period of postulate and study at Anzano. The Provincial will begin the first steps as soon as possible, with the help and the company of a confrere to be appointed.*²⁶

We can see how, while Don Domenico's long letter was apparently focusing only on the vocational aspect, the Northern Italy council immediately was adjusting and partially shifting the aim, by "highlighting the first preoccupation for a service to the poor in the area". Nevertheless, the steps that are mentioned concern essentially the work of vocation discernment and formation.

Less than two weeks later, Don Maurizio meets Fr. Anthony Njoku in Rome (28/04/1989), and a week later he informs the council of the situations: more applications are arriving (probably prompted by Fr. Okoli's return to Nigeria) and there is a confrere who has accepted to help in the vocations' discernment. The minutes read:

Progetto Africa:

Many applications are arriving from diocesan and Claretian seminarians: they seem promising, but we are also invited to be prudent and strict; nevertheless we can go on with trust, thinking to place Fr. Bogoni of the Anzano seminary by the Provincial side to follow the evolution of this movement and later welcome and follow the vocations that will come to Italy for their formation. There will be a new meeting at Rome in June with the Provincial, (Fr. Bogoni), Fr. Saginario and Nigerian priests who are accompanying and helping.

*Clearer criteria shall be decided, among them a limited period of stay for some months, in Italy, before coming for the regular formation course (postulate etc.)*²⁷

We can notice some enthusiasm, even if with caution, but we have the impression – reading the minutes – that there was some uncertainty and different opinions within the council, so that what is expressed as method of work is, at the end, less clear: were the candidates to be welcomed in Italy? Or was somebody to be sent there? Was there need of a double journey for the candidate, with a first visit, then going back home, and finally coming again for formation? ... in a sort of dismissive way, the minutes read "clearer criteria shall be decided". We could also notice something else: for the moment there is no mention of any confrere assigned to "go for mission". Fr. Bogoni has the charge of discerning, welcome, accompany the first formation of the candidates coming to Italy, but nothing is said about his moving to live in Nigeria. This topic becomes an open issue in the following council meeting:

About Africa project, Fr. Giancarlo [Pravettoni] suggests that immediately a confrere should be prepared to go and stay in place, in order to know the local situation better and to be in a better position to evaluate the applications that continue to arrive from Nigeria, also in order to avoid to take to Italy young

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ VCP 05/05/1989

*men who later, if they leave the seminary because they are judged not fit, would find it difficult to go back home and also find it difficult to integrate. But this appears impossible for the moment.*²⁸

Even here the Minutes are perhaps too brief. Nevertheless, it seems that particularly one member of the council voices out his preoccupation with some strength, while the rest may be less concerned about the possible problem, therefore the conclusion is limited to state that “it would be nice, but we can’t”.

And so the programme continues, and a few days later (22/23 ay) Don Maurizio, Fr. Bogoni and Don Domenico have a long encounter with Fr. Anthony in Rome. This is probably the moment when Fr. Anthony informs them that Bishop Unegbu is about to come to Rome, and that Fr. Anthony himself could help them and accompany them in a first visit to Nigeria the month of July.

The 13th of June Bishop Unegbu, accompanied by Fr. Kevin Akagha, meets Don Saginario and Fr. Bogoni, together with Fr. Anthony who functions as linguistic and cultural “facilitator”. The whole discussion is mainly about the possibility of receiving Nigerian candidates for the congregation and following the first steps of their formation in the local seminaries. Apparently there was no mention of possible works and activities in Owerri diocese in the short or medium term. Yet, at the end of the meeting, the Bishop visits our house in Via Aurelia Antica, Rome, and has thus a more direct idea of the service given by our works.

b. The first journey, 1989

Two weeks after that meeting, Fr. Maurizio Bianchi and Fr. Wladimiro Bogoni visit Eastern Nigeria with a rather long journey, which lasted from 2nd to 28th of July 1989. They were accompanied by Fr. Anthony Njoku.²⁹

Back home, Don Maurizio wrote on *Informazioni*:

For some time was present among the confreres the desire to step out on new frontiers. As if answering, the general council gathered in Rome the past November with the provincials of all the provinces, invited us to a more evident missionary dimension. Several signs directed us toward Nigeria. In July, with the confrere Fr. Wladimiro Bogoni, I have been in that country, precisely in Biafra, whose events of great sorrow we all remember.

Yes, I sent all the Communities a greeting from that land. But with great joy I pass now the deepest message, while re-living, with love and hope, the days we passed there:

- *I bring, entrusted to us by the bishop of Owerri Mark Unegbu, the greeting from a lively church that praising the Lord finds the courage to live in difficult conditions and continue to hope*
- *I bring the witness of a people living in great simplicity, that rekindles in our heart the desire to practise in a different way the poverty we profess*

²⁸ VCP 19/05/1989

²⁹ A. Njoku: *I happened to be there*, in 1992-2002 numero unico di *Progetto Africa* 2002, p. 27-28

- *I bring the voice of “the least”. For them, over and over, spoke the bishop who took us in person “to see” and showed us the land that his church has acquired years ago, waiting for Providence to send a religious family*
- *I bring the gift of vocations. Several young men ask to be with us at the service of Charity. Helped “in loco” for an action of vocational discernment, we achieved the first results, whose report will be given later.*

Nigeria, a gift from our Blessed Founder? I do believe it, judging also by a net of occasions which not only were facilitating, but even anticipating all our steps. And, if it is a gift from our Blessed Founder for us, on the 25th anniversary of his beatification, our duty will be to get ready to actualise the Progetto Nigeria.³⁰

The same issue of *Informazioni* includes a detailed report of the weeks of the visit. The same report was presented to the general and provincial council, and will be almost entirely published on the third issue of “*La Divina Provvidenza*” of that year.³¹

This journey marked the encounter between two major figures in the process of the “implantatio” of our congregation in Africa: the Provincial Father Maurizio Bianchi and Bishop Mark Unegbu.

Don Maurizio Bianchi, sixty years old, reluctantly accepted to become provincial less than three years earlier. He never was a “man of power”, he worked for many years in the Mother House at Como and the birthplace of Don Guanella at Fraciscio. He was lively in community life and debates, but almost on the sidelines about activities and Works, being in charge for many years of vocation pastoral. He was a man of ideas and projects, generally with a “soft” style in presenting issues, trying as much as possible to persuade rather than dictate orders, always open and attentive to suggestions.

On the other side, Bishop Unegbu, 72 years old, had shown himself an excellent administrator, capable to resurrect Owerri church after the tragedy of civil war, to lead the material and moral reconstruction of the Diocese and even give rise to new Dioceses carved out of it. He had a rigid attitude about discipline and was directing everything personally, with a calm, very practical and direct way of handling business. Influential and respected with his people at all levels, he was a man of few words and simple gestures, but he really had the heart of a father for all the members of the flourishing church he had generated.

In this encounter, many of Don Maurizio’s ideas and desires find often immediate and practical answers by the down-to-earth Bishop:

- About vocations and candidates: they will be accepted at Seat of Wisdom Seminary, and a confrere will go to visit them periodically;
- About a place where one of our priests could live with them for some time: the Diocese can easily provide a temporary place in Owerri (he suggests Emekuku, but also takes them to celebrate at the Carmelite Monastery, where actually the following year the first experience will take place);
- About a permanent place where the congregation could really take off: he takes them to Nnebukwu, where he had acquired land years earlier, and offers the land as a free gift of the Diocese to the congregation.

³⁰ *Informazioni*, August 1989, p. 3

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-42; also *La Divina Provvidenza* n.3/1989, pp. 11-17

The relationship between the two will continue with more visits, always marked by deep respect on both sides and great openness to collaboration, thus creating a basic harmony. We could note that for these two persons, as it often happens, the evangelical rule of the wheat grain that has to die to give growth became true. When, towards the end of 1993, the Guanellians were able to establish themselves finally on that Nnebukwu land they had surveyed together, both of them were out of the games: Bishop Unegbu retired during the same 1993, having just passed 75 years of age, after the Eucharistic Congress of Owerri, while Don Maurizio closed his tenure as provincial the same day in which the confreres were leaving Italy, and was happy to hand over to Fr. Alfonso Crippa.

We could also note that during this first journey, even if the main partner was Bishop Unegbu, Don Maurizio and Fr. Wladimiro did not limit their exploration to the Owerri area: they went to Enugu, visited the Archbishop of Onitsha and the Major Seminary at Ikot Ekpene.

As a fruit of the first journey, at the beginning of November the Provincial could inform the council that

The first three postulants have arrived from Nigeria, and will reside at Anzano.³²

The three young men were Lawrence Ejimofor, from Owerri Diocese, Titus Ezenyimolo from Anambra, and Christopher Obiagba from Delta State. All of them had completed their philosophical studies and had been chosen among many candidates during the July visit. Surely the help of Fr. Anthony must have been instrumental for the choice. In the same period some young men were chosen to start philosophy at Seat of Wisdom: Emmanuel, Robert, and Hyacinth.

c. The 1990 experience

The provincial chapter held in December 1989 confirmed the decision to move towards Africa: the delegates at the chapter expressed their support to the line adopted by the provincial council. Even if no specific hint comes from the documents, there must have been some exchange of ideas among the chapter confreres. When the council met in January 199a and discussed about actualising some new ideas and methods suggested in the chapter, the first point involved Africa:

Some situations are suggested to the councillors to be studied, also related to the chapter.

a. We aim toward a first realisation together with lay people: sending a married couple to Africa.³³

In the first months of 1990, ideas become clearer. Owerri diocese would be helped in her structures, choosing two basic areas to be supported:

³² VCP 03/11/1989

³³ VCP 08-09/01/1990

- a. The printing press (Assumpta Press), by donating machineries and finding a technician who could help for their installation
- b. The catholic hospital of Emekuku, by sending some materials and two doctors who would give a month of voluntary work during the summer.

In the same period, a small group of confreres would spend some weeks at Owerri, living with the candidates who were studying at Seat of Wisdom Seminary, for an experience of formation, vocation discernment, and also to study the area and be able to prepare better projects for a possible charitable action. During the Lenten period in several houses of the Province there was a programme of fund raising for the printing press and the hospital, with some success. Almost all the amount was spent in the works of renovation and buying materials for the hospital. Meanwhile the small “first expedition” was under preparation, with the choice of the confreres: two priests and one seminarian close to his last year of Theology. With them, were going to Owerri three doctors of a working experience at Emekuku hospital. All of them would stay in Owerri for about six weeks.

At the beginning of June Bishop Unegbu visited Italy again, and there was a meeting with part of the provincial council³⁴. Several ideas appeared about starting a Work in the area of Nnebukwu, not yet well defined: there was the proposal of helping the catholic hospital at Oguta, but also the offer came – and was accepted – to assume the responsibility of the newly created parish of Orsu-Obodo³⁵. The confreres to be sent were supposed to be Frs. Bogoni and Canzi, who would go for the experience in July 1990, then take off again in September 1991, to stay permanently³⁶.

In September 1990, Don Maurizio gives information on the experience and on the situation:

On 29 June three confreres took off to Nigeria: Fr. Wladimiro Bogoni, Fr. Ezio Canzi and Marco Riva. With them, dr. Pio Carlo Castagna with his wife, Sig.a Lia, architect. Later on, dr. Piero Cattaneo joined them.

In a house offered by the bishop, a Guanellian community was formed, calling to “live together” the 3 students who are doing philosophy on our behalf at the diocesan seminary: Emmanuel, Hyacinth, Robert.

Aim of this experience is to evaluate some data for the “progetto Nigeria”. Specifically:

- *the possibility of our presence as a work of evangelisation through the ministry of Charity,*
- *the possibility of a pastoral action, also enlightened by our educational project, in the village (or area) the Bishop wants to entrust to us and where a “Centre for a particular type of needy persons” should be built;*
- *the possibility of vocations pastoral, still keeping the local seminary as point of reference for the school, but taking direct charge of the formative task, involving since the beginning the young men in the Charity service.*

The confreres came back the 18th of August carrying good news, rich of hope and open on wide horizons. We are expecting their report to be studied and gradually transformed into a project.

Grateful to the Lord for this call of His, we also thank the confreres and doctors.

³⁴ VCP 07/06/1990

³⁵ VCP 08.06.1990

³⁶ VCP 07.06.1990

*Meanwhile at the Owerri seminary, the philosophy students reached the number of 10. Benedictus [sic], theology two, and Innocent, theology one, will be with us in October for the postulate, while Titus, Lawrence e Christofer [sic] begin their noviciate.*³⁷

We could consider this experience as the first real life-contact of a small Guanellian community: a few confreres Servants of Charity were living together on African soil in “their own” house (although temporary). The place of residence was the old Carmelite Monastery at Owerri, the place that later became the Assumpta Pastoral Centre on Wetheral Road, the three confreres were living together with the three seminarians. Most of the days were spent in a detailed visit to all the parishes of the diocese, interviewing especially the parish priests, and trying to have information on the services for the disable, besides holding vocational interviews with possible candidates. But the value of this experience, for the confreres involved, was not only in visiting and observing a different environment, but also in trying to enter into it and living in it their daily life. They got acquainted with markets and *okada*, started knowing about power generators and ways of purifying drinking water and scores of other small things they had to learn day after day.

In spite of the lower tune of the experience, which lasted only for six weeks and didn’t have a real “missionary” aim, but rather an aim of “evaluation”, collection and study of data, some interesting point make it an exemplary one:

- some lines of the future action of the Works were already specified: a service of charity was to be present (they were thinking already of working with the good children, even if Don Maurizio doesn’t mention them), together with a pastoral service (the parish), an organised institution (they talk about a “centre”), and the work of vocations’ discernment and formation of the candidates;
- also some methods of action were implied: the confreres were to share this work with some lay persons, the candidates undergoing formation were to be routinely involved in the charitable work.

We should probably note also that this experience remained somehow an isolated episode within the narration of our *implantatio*, almost as a promised but not actualised fruit, as some observations can suggest.

For instance, when the Work took off at Nnebukwu and for several years after there was no real fundamental and continued contribution of lay persons in the activity (apart from several experiences of one or two months). Also, only recently there was a stronger opening to the pastoral ministry in parishes.

Moreover none of the main characters of that experience has presently links with the congregation’s work in Africa: not the three confreres (only one of them was actually among the “founding fathers”), not the doctors (whose experience was never repeated), not even the three seminarians, none of which continued with us after philosophy.

During that period though, seven more candidates were chosen: two for theology (with Fr. Anthony’s help) of whom only Benedict Onyema joined, and five for philosophy, including Christopher Orji and Kelechi Maduforo.

³⁷ *Informazioni* n. – Settembre 1990, pp. 40-41

c. The troubled 1991 and the departure

After the first experience in Owerri, the plan continued peacefully for some months. Fr. Wladimiro was sent to London to study English, while Fr. Ezio had to round up his long experience of apostolate in Spain before joining him with the same aim.

In September 1991 both were supposed to go to Owerri diocese and take charge of the newly erected parish of Orsu-Obodo. The project prepared suggested a “social” vision of the parish, as a centre for co-operation and development also in agricultural work, and at the same time the beginning of a centre for handicapped persons, small but well organised, as a sign and an example for the whole area. A major part of the programme was devoted to the work of formation of the candidates to Guanellian religious and priestly life³⁸.

We lack some information, in the available documents, but we can be sure that the original programme changed during the year 1991.

Fr. Bogoni returned from London in May, while Fr. Ezio stayed there for some more time³⁹.

This could be the cause for abandoning the idea of repeating the six-weeks experience as it was done the year before. I found no word about this idea on neither on *Informazioni* nor on the minutes of the provincial council meetings. Moreover, instead of beginning a stable presence of confreres in Owerri in September/October, there is a short visit at Owerri (3 to 10 October) made by Fr. Paolo Bonomo, the provincial vicar, the councillor Fr. Adriano, and Fr. Wladimiro.

Probably something was becoming evident: that the level of the confreres’ preparation was not sufficient. Even their mastering of English language was still low, and the acquaintance with the African environment quite small compared to the project that was envisaged at the time.

Actually, looking at things after some years, it is not difficult to highlight some sort of naivety, comparing the far-reaching project of activities with the real resources present at the time. The project included, besides caring for vocations and candidates, a well organised centre for the handicapped that could be an example in the area, and a parish that should become a centre of co-operation and social and economic development for the area of Oguta lake. How could attain this, in a rural area of Igboland, priests that had no knowledge of Igbo language, of local traditions and way of thinking, and even little knowledge about English language and Nigerian laws?

The documents show no trace of such debate, but surely these were the questions present in the involved confreres’ minds, in that October 1991, when Don Maurizio was giving the following information to all the confreres:

- *The land offered previously by the Bishop of Owerri was of hectares 12.77750. Now, after a new donation by the people of the village is of hectares 22.2565.*
- *Fr. Paolo Bonomo, Fr. Adriano Folonaro and Fr. Wladimiro Bogoni made a journey to Nigeria the days 3-10 October. Their aim: contacts with the bishop for further agreements, meeting with our seminarians at the diocesan seminary, a visit to the printing press donated last year by*

³⁸ VCP 08.01.1991 *Verso un progetto Guanelliano in Nigeria* pp. 117-118

³⁹ VCP 14.04.1991

the Province, and to the catholic hospital with which some doctors friends of ours have established a link of fraternal co-operation.

- *Fr. Wladimiro and Fr. Ezio Canzi are preparing to begin our presence in Nigeria in the early weeks of January.*⁴⁰

Don Maurizio also quotes from the letter from Bishop Unegbu:

*“I look forward expectantly to the arrival of your priests in January...”*⁴¹

Apparently Don Maurizio didn't give any sign of doubt, presenting the program of action without any change except on the date of the beginning, postponed of three months. But something different happens, that is not reflected in the written documents. In that same October. at Anzano, Fr. Bogoni declared openly to the community that he was finding it difficult to continue with the project. He said that he was in a particular period of personal vocational discernment and, while being available to do the work of first discernment that was asked of him until that time, he felt he could not go and start a new foundation at the moment. He could not assure his stable presence for the period needed to start the new community in Owerri.

At this point, when apparently a whole apparatus of preparation was in a situation of total stand-by, things start moving faster, as it often happens with the “jokes of Providence”.

In that same community of Anzano, with Fr. Bogoni and Fr. Canzi preparing to go to Nigeria, there was Fr. Giancarlo Frigerio who, after several years of work with the disable in Italy and Switzerland, was preparing to go to work at Nazareth. Immediately, Don Maurizio asked him to “shift” his future field of action from Middle East to Nigeria, and he said he was available. The project, therefore, could continue, with just some corrections: Fr. Ezio would take charge of the vocations' discernment and formation work, since he had already met some of the candidates, while Fr. Giancarlo would take care of the more specific apostolic work.⁴²

During Christmas holidays in 1991 Fr. Giancarlo Frigerio visited Nigeria for his first time together with the provincial councillor Fr. Giancarlo Pravettoni, and with two printing technicians who were to set some of the donated machineries as Assumpta Press. They stayed at Naze with Fr. Anthony Njoku for about two weeks, visited Bishop Unegbu, took vision of the land at Nnebukwu. During this period contacts were taken for the first time with the Ponti building company⁴³.

The machine was now moving: on March 24th, 1992, the anniversary of the first religious profession of the Servants of Charity, in the chapel of Anzano seminary, the Superior General Fr. Pietro Pasquali gave the two confreres who were to leave the “missionary mandate”. Many confreres, representing all the houses of the Northern Italy province, were present. In his homily, Fr. Pasquali recalled:

... Obeying an interior impulse and the logic of charity itself, that knows no boundaries, already in 1913 don Guanella transplanted his religious family to the United States of America and don Leonardo Mazzucchi of blessed memory, in 1925 opened the way to Latin America for the Works of Don Guanella. This for several decades remained the privileged field of our mission.

After the beatification of don Guanella, while our presence in Latin America was consolidating and extending to other nations, wider horizons opened, not

⁴⁰ *Informazioni* n. Ottobre 1991

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Ricordi raccolti a voce da Fr. Giancarlo Frigerio, febbraio 2015

⁴³ *Ibid.*

only in old Europe (Spain), and the Middle East (Nazareth), but also in Asia, the most densely populated continent, rich of ancient traditions and cradle of the most widespread religions. The Guanellian Works recently arrived in the Philippine islands and will soon plant their tents in India.

Up to three years ago, Africa, for whom even recently the Pope showed his predilection, had not been considered. Actually, at the time of don Guanella's beatification, invitations by African Bishops were not lacking, but always were left unheeded, because our energies were absorbed by the needs of Latin America.

This evening, on the contrary, we are about to inaugurate a new journey, taking the Works of Don Guanella into the great African continent...⁴⁴

A week later, the official document for the installation of the congregation in Owerri diocese was signed by the Provincial:

The Provincial Council

Answering the confreres' desire to give the province an activity in mission lands;

having seen *the invitation from the Bishop of Owerri (Nigeria) to open a house in his diocese*

the arrival of promising local vocations

the discussions and previsions done during the past three years about:

- *the donation of the necessary land*
- *the charitable and pastoral aim, accepted and desired by the diocese*

the approval given by the General Council to the various steps of the process

the consent coming also from outside, and promising help from lay groups

seeing in all the above a sign of a Call to a new field of mission

decides *to begin the activity of the congregation in Nigeria – Owerri, entrusting the task to the confreres Fr. Ezio Canzi and Fr. Giancarlo Frigerio.*

The Council sends information of all this to the General Superior for approval and to the Bishop of Owerri

Como, 30 marzo 1992

Don Maurizio Bianchi⁴⁵

⁴⁴ *Informazioni* n. 56, maggio 1991, p. 5

⁴⁵ *VCP Apertura di un'opera in Nigeria*, maggio 1992 p. 12

The answer arrived two weeks later from the general council: the Superior General erected officially the residence of Orsu-Obodo, depending directly from the provincial superior of Northern Italy.

The decree of erection⁴⁶ stated the three apostolic goals of the new presence: rehabilitation of the disabled, pastoral ministry, and formation of new candidates to the congregation.

On May 7th 1992, the journey took off ...

⁴⁶ Ecco il testo del decreto: (vedi: *Informazioni* n. 56, maggio 1991, p. 9)

Prot.N. 11/92

Il sottoscritto Superiore Generale della Congregazione dei Servi della Carità Opera don Guanella, visto il consenso scritto, rilasciato in data 11 maggio 1991 da S.E. Mons. Mark Unegbu, vescovo di Owerri (Nigeria),

su richiesta formale del superiore e consiglio della nostra provincia del Nord Italia comunicato il 01 aprile 1992,

tenuto conto dell'imminente partenza per la Nigeria dei confratelli don Ezio Canzi e don Giancarlo Frigerio,

con voto deliberativo del consiglio generale espresso il 10 aprile scorso,

a norma del diritto della Chiesa e nostro particolare col presente decreto

erige come residenza direttamente dipendente dal Superiore della Provincia del Nord Italia la comunità religiosa che inizierà in Orsu Obodo.

La casa ha come suo scopo la cura di persone handicappate secondo la tradizione della nostra Congregazione e, a suo tempo, sarà anche centro pastorale, in base alle disposizioni del Vescovo di Owerri e in accordo con l'Opera don Guanella. Nel frattempo sarà pure compito dei Confratelli seguire in Nigeria la formazione dei giovani aspiranti alla Congregazione e svolgere l'attività vocazionale.

Copia del presente decreto sarà conservata nel nostro archivio ed in quelli della provincia del Nord Italia e della casa di Orsu Obodo.

Dato in Roma, il 16 aprile 1992

Il Segretario Generale

Don Tonino Gridelli

Il Superiore Generale

Don Pietro Pasquali .

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