

# REPORT OF THE EUROPEAN-AFRICAN RECONCILIATION CONFERENCE KINSHASA 19-21 JUNE 2008 + LUBUMBASHI 23 JUNE

This reconciliation conference was (after Berlin 2005, Harare 2006, Libreville 2007) the **fourth big conference** in the scope of the "Europe-Africa Reconciliation Process" (EARP, started in 1999). The goal was that representatives of the European nations that had participated in the colonisation of Africa would confess their historical guilt to their former colonies on all the injustice, repression and cruelties that happened in that time. It is almost impossible to convey the intense experience of the trip to Africa and the reconciliation conference to those who were not there. In any case this assignment has gone beyond the expectations of all participants.

Let's start at the beginning. On 16 June we left from Zaventem. The **Belgian delegation** consisted of Willy De Vylder (Haacht) and Ignace Demaerel (Schaarbeek), Nestor and Domie Kamuanga (pastor in Brussels with his wife, both from Congolese descent); Albert Leclercq (pastor in Uccle) was already in Congo because of another missions trip and joined us in Kinshasa. In the preparation period they had asked us to assemble a strong Belgian delegation, preferably with representatives of the politics, the Catholic Church and the monarchy. Concerning the last we have done all we could possibly do, approached all our contacts, mailed, called and although some were sympathetic towards the initiative, nobody was able to attend. With the small delegation we had we gave all we could give and achieved a lot.

In addition, for the **European delegation** there were 5 delegates from England, 1 from Scotland, 1 from Wales, 1 from Germany, 2 from the Netherlands (all together 5 nations of 14 involved in colonisation). In total we had 20 Europeans there. From the **African delegation** there were delegates from Congo, Congo-Brazzaville, Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya, Nigeria, Angola, Zimbabwe and South-Africa.

As the European delegation, I can't state it any other way, we were welcomed as ministers: everywhere we were officially welcomed, seated on the first row of the platform, constantly guided during transports, loaded with gifts, lodged in a chic hotel. We had reserved a simple guesthouse, but the Congolese committee was offended by this and insisted to treat us with proper African hospitality and receive us on their expenses as guests of honour. We humbly and thankfully submitted to their arrangements.

The conference itself took place on 19-21 June in the "Cathédrale du Centenaire", a modern protestant cathedral, built by the "Eglise du Christ au Congo", a co-operation of 65 protestant denominations. The cathedral can hold according to some 10.000 people, with at least 5000 seating (during the closing meeting the place was packed).

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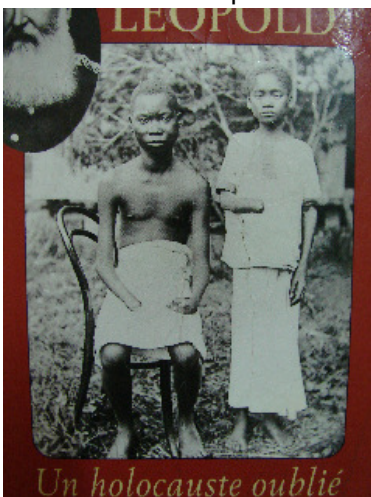
There was a lot of enthusiastic music and dance, brought by colourful choirs and groups. During the opening meeting the minister of state, the direct representative of the president, opened the conference and expressed the explicit support of the president and put the conference under the protection of God. For us as Europeans it is wonderful to see how much room there is for God in the African politics: the forced separation of church and state they do not have and it is perfectly "normal" and accepted for a Christian politician to pray and link politics with faith in his speeches.

Then there were several speeches on the history of the reconciliation process, the history of colonisation and its cruelties, humiliations and injustice, and the need for forgiveness and reconciliation. On the second day we Europeans were surprised again: one person of the Congolese committee had received from God to ask for an offering for the European delegation as a restitution of all the Africans had stolen from the Europeans in the course of the centuries, as a prophetic act to break this mentality: we were ashamed because of this strong spiritual act.



During the **closing meeting** there were some ministers and members of parliament present, the governor of the province Kinshasa and a whole row of bishops. The minister of state was present again. Five European delegations confessed, on their knees, the sins of their country concerning the colonisation, all the

injustice, the repression and the cruelties that had taken place. As the Belgian delegation we got the most time and we probably had the most to confess. Few Belgians know the history of the cruelties committed by Leopold II and Stanley in Congo: the deceitful contracts, forced labour in rubber plantations, unfair exploitation of earth resources,



chopped hands if resistant, taking hostage of women, humiliations, millions of deaths... At school we were only told the positive things, but thanks to recent publications and television documentaries the truth is surfacing. We must admit that not a lot of Belgians are concerned with our national sins from the past, but for Africans this feeling is stronger: they experience the consequences still every day politically, economically, psychologically and morally. We could read an **official confession letter** signed by the Flemish and French speaking Evangelical Alliance. Our confession was warmly and gratefully received. Finally they

saw Europeans who came especially to humble themselves on their knees and in that way show a completely other side of "Christianity" than the former colonists who had mixed missions with repression. From this angle our mission was more than



accomplished. During the closing meeting the same **minister of state** gave a speech **on behalf of the president**, in which he granted forgiveness at heart, but also confessed the own guilt of Congo caused by "the neglect of the human value and of the human being created in God's image". He asked for forgiveness from the other African delegations and forgave them for what they had done to Congo. And at the end he said: "*je confie ce jour le destin du pays à l'Eternel Dieu des armées, le Créateur du ciel et de la terre afin qu'il soit le seul Maître et Guide du processus de sa reconstruction et de son développement.*

*Que Dieu tout puissant daigne étendre sa main et sa miséricorde sur nos peuples, nos nations, pour plus d'amour, de solidarité, de justice et de paix afin de donner à tous un monde où il fait bon vivre par sa grâce. Que Dieu bénisse la République Démocratique du Congo.»* (« Today I entrust the destination of the country to the Eternal, the Lord of hosts, Creator of heaven and earth, that He will be the only Lord and Leader of the process of rebuilding and development. That the almighty God may stretch out his hand and his mercy over our peoples, our nations, for more love, solidarity, justice and peace, to give everybody a world where it is good to live through his grace. That God may bless the Democratic Republic of Congo »).

After the confession of sins we did "un acte prophétique de restitution" (a prophetic acts of restoration): symbolically the map of Congo (beaten in a copper plate) was handed back by Belgium to the Congolese people (and the map of Africa to the African people). Then all the participants blessed Europe, so that the spiritual dryness over Europe would stop.

The **press coverage** was, according to our norms, overwhelming. Twice we went with part of the team to record a television programme on the reconciliation process. But also during the meetings and afterwards the press was there abundantly – the closing meeting was broadcast live on national TV. The organising committee had printed 35 big banners and posted them on busy crossroads to invite people. After the conference we still had a meeting with the vice-minister of budget in his office.



**On Sunday morning** we were the guests in the church "La Louange", a church started 14 years ago and which now has several ten thousand members, with daughter churches in the whole of Kinshasa, Congo and other African and European nations. Also in this service the reconciliation was continued by the African delegates (from Rwanda, Angola, South-Africa, Congo-Brazzaville) who asked for forgiveness to Congo; a person from Rwanda washed the feet of a Congolese woman. This went very deep as well. After this meeting we all had to go and preach separately in different daughter churches of La Louange (The Praise) – a special experience.

**On Monday** there was an extension planned to the conference: the Belgian delegation was invited to fly especially to **Lubumbashi** (on their expenses), the capital of the province Katanga, the mining area, from which the earth resources were shipped and still are to the west. Willy De Vylder, Ignace Demaerel and Nestor Kamuanga went there.

There a smaller conference was organised in the building of the provincial parliament with 300-400 church leaders. The same message was brought and also received very well by the provincial minister of culture and religion as representative of the province governor, who held a warm and profound speech at the end.



Our nine days flew by. In any case big steps have been made in this reconciliation process. **Is this the end?** There is still a lot of work to make this known, in Africa, but even more in Europe. This process needs to be brought several levels higher (church, government, monarchy). Interesting to know is that on 18 October 2008 it will be precisely 100 years ago that Congo was sold by Leopold II under great pressure (caused by the abusive situation) to the Belgian state. And in 2010 Congo will celebrate her 50th year of independence. Two very good occasions to start working on government level towards reconciliation. There are also plans to organise a next reconciliation conference in July 2009 in Rwanda en Burundi. Because *"...he has committed to us the message of reconciliation"* (2 Corinthians 5:18-20). Pray to God that this will work through mightily on all levels.

Ignace Demaerel