

MISSIONARIES OF AFRICA

BELGIUM SECTOR

Friday 23 July 2021



Dear confreres,

As communications went on, the situation was “worrying”, “serious” and finally “desperate”. Yesterday, 22 July, at 6.30 am, our confrere

Xavier Biernaux

died at the CIMAK clinic in Goma, where he had been transferred on Friday

16 July, at the request of the Carmelite Sisters' hospital, which was not as well equipped for COVID and where Xavier had been hospitalised on 10 July.

Xavier was born on 24 August 1935 in Uccle, but the family soon moved to Waterloo. His father was a modest industrial, his mother a committed Christian and propagandist of the “Grands Lacs” in the time of Father Leloir. After primary school in Waterloo, Xavier followed the classical humanities at the Cardinal Mercier College in Braine-l'Alleud. In 1949, as a Cub Scout, he attended the first mass of Paul Van Ravestijn in Wauthier-Braine; they were standing in front of the church. “And that Sunday I felt the Lord saying to me... ‘why not you?’ ” In September 1956 Xavier entered the White Fathers in Thy-le-Château, did the novitiate in Varsenare before going to Heverlee for theology. He has a gentle and docile character, of great simplicity; he is not a great intellectual, but he is gifted with a lot of practical sense, good organizer and methodical. He is very charitable and devoted to the sick and unfortunate. He is a hard worker and a pleasant colleague. But his health is delicate and he will have to watch out for his liver ailments. On 28 June 1962 he took his missionary oath and was ordained a priest on 29 June 1963.

Appointed to the South-East Congo Region, he left on 28 December 1963 for Bukavu, where he began studying the language at the CELA. He wrote to the Belgian provincial: ‘Here in Bukavu, I have everything to be happy. I will not hide from you that this atmosphere of semi-security in which we live, as well as the social misery of the people, is a bit disconcerting for the newcomer!’ First appointment: 1 August in Cihirano, where he is struck by the many sick people (especially malnourished children) and people without work. The country had to recover from the many hasty departures of settlers, traders and other technicians after independence. After his first leave of absence, we find him at the beginning of April 1969 in Kadutu and a few months later in Murhesa. Appointments or replacements followed one another: Bagira, Nyantende, parish priest ad interim in Cibimbi until the Diocesan priests took over, Cimpunda and Bagira again. Xavier built a lot, especially schools. “One of the men who can be said to have a brick in his belly,” said Bishop François-Xavier Maroy. He avoided being appointed to Thy-le-Château and, in 1979, was able to take advantage of the retreat session in Jerusalem. On his return he became curate at Cah.

After a few years as curate in Cihirano, he became the parish priest in January 1985. He was the only PB there with two young priests. On the occasion of his silver jubilee, he

notes: "Looking back on these years, I realise how much the Lord was my guide and how much he filled me! And we are but vessels of clay! On his return from leave in 1990, Xavier was appointed parish priest in Mubumbano; at the beginning of May 1993 he became parish priest in Burhiba. Towards the end of his stay in this parish, he became a regional councillor.

On his return from leave, Xavier was appointed to the Maison Charles Lwanga, the regional house, in Bukavu. He was in charge of the local bursar's office and followed young future candidates. In September 2004, he participated in the DMA session in Jerusalem. Back in the country, he was appointed to Katoy (in the city of Goma), where he was parish priest until April 2010. During his leave of absence he attended the Senior Session at the MG. On his return in November 2013, he became parish priest in Buholo, a new parish in the city of Bukavu, the Holy Trinity parish, where he built the parish church, the schools next to the beautiful church. He does not insist on the fact that at that time, every two days, his back and legs are massaged... At the beginning of 2016, he underwent surgery on his lumbar vertebrae.

His final appointment, September 2019, will be as Mzee (old sage) at Foyer Ngongo and prison chaplain in Goma. When he told us about the seriousness of Xavier's health, the provincial of the PAC, Father Emmanuel Ngona, pointed out that during the annual retreat in January 2021 Xavier had categorically refused to return to Belgium, because he felt happy among the young people at the propaedeutic in Goma and he also loved his apostolate at the prison in Goma. A missionary to the end! May he rest in peace.¹

You will read a more detailed report later, written by his province.

The funeral Mass will take place in the church of Our Lady of Africa in Katoy on Tuesday 27 July at 10 a.m., presided over by Bishop Ngumbi of Goma, followed by the removal of the body to the General Hospital of Maternal Charity and burial in the Buhimba cemetery, where - because of the pandemic - only the Missionaries of Africa and some members of Xavier's family will be present (official communication from the diocese of Goma).

Jef Vleugels

¹ The parishioners among whom Xavier worked will express their gratitude during his lifetime in a book of testimonies compiled by Vincent Mukwege Buhendwa, entitled "The Pastoral Work of Father Xavier Biernaux. A Missionary of Africa at the service of the Archdiocese of Bukavu. From 1963 to the present day. Testimonies and stories on the educational mission in the Great Lakes Region of Africa", Editions Beacom, Kigali 2017, 232 pages.