

Modeling Pope Francis' Encyclical Laudato Si' – Marist Nkoloman Agricultural Project

by Albert Kabala, SM, District Superior of Africa

In the heart of the central African forest, you find the city of Yaoundé, Cameroon. I along with other Marists are working in the Nkoloman Agricultural Project with local young people answering the call of Pope Francis's 2013 encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, "On Care for Our Common Home."

On a little over 12 verdant acres of rich farmland, purchased by the Marists in 2015, we work alongside young men who are becoming acquainted with the kind of manual labor that bears fruit – literally. We have planted 7,000 cocoa plants, 13,000 banana plantain plants, and 75 fruit trees (oranges, plums, avocado, pawpaw). We also have a vegetable garden featuring cocoa, yams, maize, sweet potatoes, a pineapple farm, a poultry farm, and even a fish farm boasting three different species and 2,200 fish. We respect nature by using natural farming methods without the use of chemicals. We have supplied the farm with electricity through a new solar panel and have also started a well that provides drinking water for the farm. In his encyclical, the Pope tells us:

"One particularly serious problem is the quality of water available to the poor. Every day unsafe water results in many deaths and the spread of water-related diseases, including those caused by microorganisms and chemical substances." (Laudato Si', 29)

Our workers recognize the advantages of biological/organic techniques to help them be well-nourished, financially independent, and ready to create jobs for others.

Yaoundé is a high-poverty area losing most of its young people to emigration. We hope to plant more than crops. We are planting skills, hope, and the opportunity for a better future right here.

"Every campesino (farmer) has a natural right to possess a reasonable allotment of land where he can establish his home, work for the subsistence of his family and a secure life. This right must be guaranteed so that its exercise is not illusory but real. That means that apart from the ownership of property, rural people must have access to means of technical education, credit, insurance, and markets." (Laudato Si', 94)

As a natural response to the harsh realities here, we were drawn to the encyclical (Nos. 13-14), seeing the opportunities this kind of living provides:

"The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change. The Creator does not abandon us; he never forsakes his loving plan or repents of having created us. Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home. ... Young people demand change. They wonder how anyone can claim to be building a better future without thinking of the environmental crisis



Harvesting cocoa pods from the rich farmland

and the sufferings of the excluded. I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all. ... We require a new and universal solidarity. As the bishops of Southern Africa have stated: "Everyone's talents and involvements are needed to redress the damage caused by human abuse of God's creation". All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents."

The Marists of the District of Africa choose to live alongside the poorest among us at the very edge of the village. We seek to cultivate the hopeful promise that naturally resides in young people. We do this in the heart of the forest, without potable water or a good accessible road. The conditions are precarious and formal education is often lacking. We are living with a sense of urgency to train these young people to a point where they can see a future for themselves and create opportunities for their neighbors.

We rely on our Marist tradition as educators to create a recognizable foundation for the future, weaving theory with agricultural technology. One day we hope to build small classrooms in the fields where we can provide formal lessons. We want to stifle any temptation to the young people to move to the west by educating and training them here for a future here.