



**Conseil Mondial de la Famille Marianiste**

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**World Council of the Marianist Family  
Consejo Mundial de la Familia Marianista**

## **MARIANIST WORLD DAY OF PRAYER**

**OCTOBER 13, 2019**

**MARIAN SHRINE OF OUR LADY OF ATACORA,**

**MOTHER OF UNITY AND GOOD COUNSEL**

**LOCATION: NATITINGOU, BENIN (West Africa)**



*Entrance to the Shrine*

## **REPUBLIC OF BENIN**

With an area of 114,763 km<sup>2</sup> [44,310 m<sup>2</sup>], Benin is a French-speaking country located on the West African coast. It is known to have been a hub of slave traffic and the origin of voodoo worship. Out of a population of about 8,500,000, 34% are baptized. Others practice traditional religions and Islam.

Formerly known as Dahomey, it became independent on August 1, 1960. A new constitution was adopted and the head of government, Hubert Maga, became the first president of the young Republic. On October 26, 1972, Major Mathieu Kerekou seized power and established a revolutionary military government. The country became the People's Republic of Benin and adhered to Marxism-Leninism; the Party of the People's Revolution of Benin was created. A new constitution was adopted on September 9, 1977, and remained in force until 1990. A former president characterized Benin after seventeen years as "a country without industry but ruled in the name of the working class, of Romania without exports, of Bohemia without factories, Poland without coal, Prussia without discipline." In 1990, Benin organized the first ever sovereign national conference of the African continent and reinstated democracy with elections of presidents of the Republic by universal suffrage.

## **THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN BENIN**

The first Catholic presence in the country was the work of Portuguese missionaries, who built a chapel in Ouidah on the coast in 1680. But a true work of evangelization began only with the arrival of the missionaries of the Society of the African Missions in 1860 and the foundation of the missions of Porto-Novo and Agoué on the coast. On June 26, 1883, the Apostolic Prefecture of Dahomey was erected. In 1928, the first indigenous priest was ordained. On September 14, 1955, with the Bull *Dum Tantis* Pope Pius XII erected the Catholic hierarchy in the country. In 1957, Bernardin Gantin became the first Beninese bishop. He was created Cardinal twenty years later. In 1982 and 1993, the Catholic Church was visited by Pope John Paul II.

The Catholic Church is divided into two ecclesiastical provinces, the Province of Cotonou, composed of five dioceses, and the Province of Parakou, also with five dioceses. Besides opposition from Freemasonry, the Catholic Church is currently undergoing an ordeal linked to a lady named Perfect who claims she is God on

earth and who has ordained a "pope" embodying the Holy Spirit; she attracts many Christian faithful to her "church."

The 2010 statistics give 2,800,000 baptized in the country, of whom 778 are priests and 1,510 are religious.



*Cathedral of Ouidah*

### **THE CITY OF NATITINGOU**

The name of the town of Natitingou, where the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Atacora is located, was given to it by the missionaries. It comes from Nantotingou, that is to say the "village of Nanto," founder of the city; the name means "the Crusher/Grinder," because the founder himself used to grind his own grain for cooking instead of letting women do it, as was the custom at the time and still is today in most families in Africa.

Located in northwest Benin, Natitingou covers an area of 3,045 km<sup>2</sup> [1,176 m<sup>2</sup>]. The city is located in a valley at the foot of the Atacora mountain range, which rises to 641 meters [2,103 feet] above sea level.

The climate is Sudano-Guinean, characterized by two seasons: a rainy season that lasts six months (May to October), and a dry season. Soils are generally lateritic, stony, sandy, and clayey. The vegetation is characterized by a wooded savanna with shrubs and herbs. According to the 2013 census, the population of Natitingou was about 100,000 inhabitants. The population is dominated by youth, and has an ethnic and linguistic diversity. The inhabitants engage in various religious practices,

ranging from animism or traditional religion (largest religious group) to Christianity (2nd in numbers) through Islam (3rd). Near the city are many natural attractions, such as the Kota Falls, the Penjari Park, or simply the wooded savannah.

### **THE HISTORY OF THE MARIANIST PRESENCE IN BENIN**

The history of Marianists in Benin began with the insistent appeal of the then Bishop Pascal N'koué in the early days of his episcopate in 1997. During a regular visit to his spiritual father and friend, Bishop Ignace Talakena, he became aware of the presence of the Marianist brothers and their apostolate at the Collège Chaminade in Kara, Togo. Seduced by their educational missionary scope and sensitive to the need of his diocese, he expressed his desire to see the Marianist brothers settle in Natitingou. After 10 years of discernment, the brothers responded favorably.

On July 28, 2007, Bros. Jonas Kpatcha and Christian Gnala, assigned to the new mission, and accompanied by several other brothers, including the then Regional Superior, Bro. Maximin Magnan, arrived in Natitingou for a first contact. In August, Bro. Joseph Adaki joined the new community. On September 1, at the end of the annual retreat at the Bishop Bakpessi Center in Kara, the three pioneer brothers were sent on mission. On October 4th, the doors of the *collège* opened in the premises of the Cathedral of Natitingou, with 13 students under the direction of the Brother Director, Jonas Kpatcha. It took three years to complete the school building on its planned site in Pèporiyakou, eight km [five miles] north of Natitingou. The late Colonel Adolphe Biaou donated and expanded the terrain. The various infrastructure facilities: the barbed wire fence, the first educational block, the brothers' community residence, all were furnished with electricity. Already in July 2010, the pioneering team of Bros. Jonas Kpatcha, Christian Gnala, Joachim Agbetongon, Abraham Mewezino, and Thierry Kadja began to live in the new premises of the Pèporiyakou community. On September 26, the community was named "Blessed Sabino Ayastuy Marianist Community" in honor of one of the four Marianist Martyrs, educators, who were beatified in October 2007, the year of foundation in Benin. In addition, a biological brother and sister of the latter, Father Severino and Sister Caridad had worked in Africa (Togo) for several years for the implantation of the Marianist charism. On December 20, 2010, after the successive installation of the brothers and the opening of the new school year, the ceremony of inauguration and blessing of the premises was celebrated with the

participation of many authorities, friends, and benefactors of the community. In July 2011, Bros. Jonas Kpatcha, Director of the community and the *collège*, and Abraham Mewezino were assigned to Rome and Kara respectively. They were replaced by Bros. Dominique Agaté, Community Director and School Treasurer, and Bro. Joseph Adaki, Director of the *collège*. In October 2012, the community experienced another configuration: Brother Christian was assigned to Kara and two new brothers arrived: Alexis Pelei and Casimir Tcheou. They had the immense joy of the effectiveness of the Marianist mixed composition (a principle hitherto not functional in the community) through the priestly ordination of Brother Casimir on October 13, 2012. A week later was the celebration of the perpetual vows of Bro. Joachim Agbétogon. All these events gave new life to the community and the *collège*. In October 2013, a departure, an arrival: Brother Joachim was assigned to Kara and Brother Anselme came from the community of Lome. In July 2014, after his perpetual vows, Bro. Thierry Kadja was assigned to Dayton (USA) to continue his studies. That left the community with five religious: Dominique Agaté, Casimir Tcheou, Alexis Péléi, Anselme Agbessi, and Joseph Adaki. The latter were joined in September 2015 by Bro. Ignace Guéba who finished his study cycle in Nairobi. In December 2015, Bro. Anselme Agbessi made his perpetual vows and in November 2016, the community was increased to seven brothers by the arrival of Bro. Lucien Gnakou from Nairobi. In 2017, Fr. Casimir and Bro. Anselme were sent elsewhere, and Bro. Stanislas Limdéyou and Fr. Matthieu Balana arrived. One year later, Brothers Joseph and Dominique left Benin for Togo; Bro. David Mignouna joined the community of Pèporiyakou. Father Matthieu then took over the direction of the school, while Brother Stanislas headed up the community.

During these 12 years of presence in Benin, the Blessed Sabino Ayastuy Marianist Community has carried out its mission of education in faith not only at the Collège Chaminade, but also in other places of evangelization among the Marianist family and in the local Church. Concerning the Marianist family, the brothers animate a Marianist Lay Community (MLC) at the Cathedral. Another MLC had been developed in Cotonou well before that one and remains very active. The MLCs of Benin were officially recognized this year by the World Council of MLCs. For the local Church, they participate in the animation of the liturgy, catechesis, liturgical groups of the parish and its outlying missions. As to vocations, the candidates are still too young to make up their minds. Nevertheless, there is constant development of awareness.

## **THE HISTORY OF THE MARIAN SHRINE OF OUR LADY OF ATACORA: AN IDEA AND A DECISION**

It was in September 1998 that Father Michel L'Hostis of the Society of African Missions, appointed for the training of catechists, devoted himself to finishing the construction of the great hall where the sessions would be held. He wrote this resolution: "For my new work to bear fruit, I entrust the Saint Paul Center to the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph. May Saint Joseph be its guardian! May he help me to seek only what is really useful for building up faith and the knowledge of hearts."

However, he was struggling to live next to an area of brush, the current location of the Marian Shrine. Only a few women ventured there to cut wood and some children to fetch cashews. One evening when he recited vespers in the yard, a big spitting cobra grazed him and entered the bush. The decision to clean the whole area came immediately. Since many students were looking for money to pay for the start of school, they volunteered and very quickly, nature was temporarily under control. But how many big stones lay here and there! The work continued and a pleasant setting was arranged for those who would like to find peace and greenery for a moment of recollection.

The idea of making a Marian shrine had not yet come up, although, at the beginning of the pastoral season in October, Bishop Pascal N'Koue had asked all the priests to look for a place to carry out what was a very important priority for him: a center of pilgrimage in honor of the Virgin Mary. He asked all the priests and religious not only to seek but also to pray for it to quickly see the light of day.

At the Christmas holidays, the valiant young workers completed the clearing and it was then that this natural mound, where the grotto and the altar are currently located, became noticeable and the idea of making it the place of pilgrimage began to sprout. Fr. Michel L'Hostis spoke to some people who found the idea far-fetched, especially since another location already seemed to be appropriate. Nevertheless, in early 1999, he informed the bishop who came immediately to the scene. After considerable thought about it, although not without hesitation, because if the setting was beautiful, the condition of the surrounding area was much less so, the bishop gave Father Michel the green light, assuring him of his confidence. So the work could begin. All the big stones that one sees in the Sanctuary had to be unearthed, transported, and cemented in place without the help of any machine: but merely with the strength, courage, and joy of the



students. The women and young people of the surrounding village gave a hand. Nevertheless a few hours of a bulldozer were needed for leveling, before the acacia could be planted.

The year 2000 was approaching and with it the Jubilee. In January 1999, one could not imagine that the Marian shrine would actually be inaugurated a year later, on January 22! Or those pilgrimages could take place there. Bishop Pascal N'Koue inaugurated the Marian Shrine "Our Lady of the Atacora, Mother of Unity and Good Counsel" on Saturday, January 22, 2000. He exclaimed in his homily: "The long-awaited day has finally arrived. This day, Saturday, in the week of prayer for Christian unity, a day dedicated to the Virgin Mary, in January, the month of peace of the Jubilee Year, the Holy Year dedicated to the Holy Trinity."

The large cross on the left of the altar was placed in early January 2000. A carillon of three bells was donated to the Shrine. During the Jubilee Year the first pilgrimages to the Shrine were organized. The first big youth pilgrimage took place on May 1, 2000. The beautification of the Marian sanctuary continued with the work of the successors of Fr. Michel L'Hostis, the benefactors, and the valuable help of the Sisters of the Little Family, Sisters of Our Lady of Nazareth from Togo, Sisters of Saint Thomas de Villeneuve (France), and the consecrated men of Obra de Maria from Brazil. One of the Sisters of the Little Family who was part of the first team of the animators of the Shrine recounts: "It had been proposed that the major altar should be erected on two praying hands, and that the sacrificial table should have an oval shape, the whole built with local stones. This is the attitude of a praying soul who participates and offers sacrifice to the Father.







## **THE SHRINE OF OUR LADY OF ATACORA OR "THE GREEN BASILICA"**

Bishop Pascal N'Koue of Natitingou, who wanted this shrine in his diocese, introduced this great place of pilgrimage: "Every year, since 1996, thousands of people, without drum or trumpet, flock to a poor place, rustic but not lacking in charm.

"When we are there, what an awesome silence! What a feeling of peace! What a symphony of gratitude! All of Atacora is there in miniature: the lush vegetation, the inexhaustible waters of the brook gently rolling to the south, the impregnable rock, inviting us to build our lives on its solidity and not on moving sand. This is a successful synthesis where all comes together as one. In addition, this place is far from all the noise and smelly pollution of cities.

"As if this were not sufficient, to these natural beauties, the hand of man, by divine inspiration, delicately added a grotto inhabited by a woman. It is the presence of this woman that gives a supernatural value to this place. And who is this woman? A mother. And what mother? The Mother of Jesus, who is God. And this Mother of God and men is a real magnet attracting everyone. With filial piety we say: Our Lady of Atacora. She has a bronzed complexion, simple, beautiful, radiant, resplendent, sublime, and flawless. When we visit her, she hastens to generously offer us her divine son, the only true Savior of the world. He too has the local color. The eyes of both are full of tenderness; and the word Love seems to constantly escape from their lips.

"To visit this Virgin it is necessary to take a track of 3 km [1.9 miles] from the international road crossing Natitingou, but which seems long and interminable because of its sorry state, an image of our always turbulent country. Then there it is! It is always worth making that sacrifice to discover this majestic and dignified green basilica. Scientists would speak of an ecological basilica. It's really a precious pearl among the trees.

"You understand, this place is not on the heights; yet hills are not lacking in the region. It does not impose itself; it does not present itself from a distance. It is neither arrogant nor aggressive nor ambitious. You have to look for it before you find it. There is a reason for all this. It is that it wants to be welcoming, sweet, and discreet like the Virgin herself. It also spontaneously invites sinners to humble themselves and to conversion.

"It is truly an atypical sanctuary: without portal or stained glass, without vaults or arches, without gold or diamonds, without visual distraction in this era of the image when one thinks a lot with the eyes. In addition, it is open on all sides and accessible to all, day and night. No one needs to ask the keeper or the sacristan for the key. Thus, pilgrims of all faiths and categories, poor and rich, the unfortunate and businessmen, come with full respect and trust to ask, one a grace, one a favor, one a comfort, one a success, one a miracle, one some good advice ....

"Let us give thanks to the Lord for all the favors already obtained by the prayers of his Immaculate Mother, Mother of priests, model of consecrated persons, and Queen of families. Let us also give thanks for all the divine help we receive through her. "

## **TESTIMONIALS**

### **From a former rector of the Shrine of Our Lady of Atacora:**

"I keep the memory, not only of pilgrimages of crowds, but also of those discrete pilgrimages, especially on Saturdays and Sundays: families who come to get fresh ideas, to refresh themselves near the Queen of families, young people who come to implore her in May for their coming exams, and sometimes forget to come back to thank her for their success, but the Virgin Mary does not wait for their return, priests in recollection or spiritual retreat .... More than the healing of the bodies, although real, it is especially the healing of hearts, relief from fatigue, strength from discouragement, this is what those who come find with this heart so maternal among all. . . . in those four years, I saw many groups of catechumens preparing for the sacraments, and even tourists touched by grace. All admired the relaxing setting. . . . The infrastructures are poor, but it is good so, the hand of man being erased before the hand of God who has prepared this setting from the beginning so that one might pray to his Mother. The diocesan pilgrimage itself has developed; it now extends over two days. All languages sing the Virgin, local languages, and even Latin. The torchlight processions illuminate the cool night of the *harmattan* [dry season from December through February]. To the tired soul, the wounded heart, the weary body, I make this invitation: come and sit down and spend an afternoon in front of the grotto, come into this verdant setting in which play squirrels, multicolored birds . . . Mary is really there like the gate of heaven which leads us from the ephemeral beauty of the earth to the eternal and ineffable one of the heavenly city." "



### **Seminarians of the Minor Seminary near the sanctuary:**

"What a joy to be at the foot of a Marian sanctuary! More than once, we have participated in various pilgrimages to the shrine of Our Lady of Atacora and several times we went there to pray personally. Every time, and at each of our visits to the spot, the very first thing which attracts us and reassures us, is the beauty of the landscape which incites to prayer as much by its greenness as by its quite particular climate. .... We feel truly protected by the Virgin Mary, Mother of seminarians, who does not leave her children without giving them good advice for the construction of their future according to the will of God . . . . And our greatest wish is to see spreading to all Christians the devotion to the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Atacora, because to quote the words of our Bishop, "the Virgin Mary must occupy an important place in our hearts. We cannot go to the Son without passing through the Mother. And one of the best opportunities to witness to this love of Mary is, of course, pilgrimages. Why let so many graces fly away? Let's go to Mary, she is waiting for us there, her Son in her hands!"



### **From a pagan who became a Muslim, then a Christian:**

“Although born with the name of Robert, I was like a pagan. However, I chose to become a Muslim so as not to differentiate myself from my foster family. As the oldest of all the children in my foster family, I was appointed Imam by our Quranic teacher to lead family prayers. .... When leaving Natitingou to go to Cotonou (capital of Benin) for university studies, I met a Catholic couple who hired me to supervise their children. This family shared their faith with me. They taught me to meditate on the rosary. I often asked the Virgin Mary to give me a Catholic wife to consolidate my still nascent faith. It was then that I met the one who is my wife in the Lord today. With her, we decided to get together to avoid the threat of my Muslim cousins with whom I shared the same roof in Cotonou. We decided to pray the rosary as our weapon, constantly imploring the help of the Virgin Mary. One morning, I received the call from a person working on a project; I was invited to Natitingou for a six-month work contract. Thanks to this first contract, we were able to make the dowry. But there remained the marriage. It was again during the rosary recited together that I received another call for another six-month contract. It is with that money that we got married.

“The Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Benevolence, as my wife and I like to call her often, is at the heart of our home. She is the mother of our little family. My wife and I have never made a big decision without consulting her. In the same way all that we have obtained so far is thanks to her intercession. Every household like us should set up their statue in a visible corner of the house and every morning and evening devote themselves to praying the rosary. ”

### **PRAYER TO OUR LADY OF ATACORA**

Holy Virgin, Our Lady of Atacora, humble servant of the Lord, we thank you for saying "YES" to the plan of God to save us through his Son Jesus. We consecrate to you our country, the diverse peoples that compose it, its men and women, and especially the blessed and hill-ringed land where we live.

As soon as the Holy Spirit came upon you and you conceived Jesus, you hurried off to the mountainous region of Judea to serve your cousin Elisabeth. Come visit us and stay in our homes to grow the seed of the Christian faith brought by the first missionaries of the Gospel.



Our Lady of Atacora, we venerate you as Mother of unity and good counsel. Gather us by your maternal tenderness. Make us committed disciples who, in the image of your divine Son, are distinguished by love and forgiveness given and received. Let us proclaim the Gospel fearlessly to those who do not know it. Help us to labor with enthusiasm for the glory of God, to work wholeheartedly for justice and peace, for the social, intellectual, moral, and spiritual progress of our region. May we be really salt of the earth and light of the world!

O powerful Queen of families, we beseech you, watch over our families, and protect especially those who are threatened with destruction. Encourage parents to fully assume their responsibilities as God's collaborators and exemplary educators.

O Blessed Virgin, teach us to always do the will of your Son and be docile to your own recommendation: "Do whatever he tells you." Give our bodies strength and health, our hearts purity and piety. Support us in trials so that we remain constantly united to you and always faithful to the Catholic Church. O Mother of God, Our Lady of Atacora, bless us, bless our diocese, and bless our country.

Amen.

Our Lady of Atacora, pray for us.