

Fall 2017

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Recommended Citation

Neves, T. (2017). Spiritans for Today: Manuel de Sousa Gonçalves, C.S.Sp.. *Spiritan Horizons*, 12 (12). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons/vol12/iss12/10>

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SPIRITANS FOR TODAY: MANUEL DE SOUSA GONÇALVES, C.S.SP. MAN OF IMPOSSIBLE MISSIONS



Fr. Tony Neves, C.S.Sp. Fr. Tony Neves, C.S.Sp. is currently provincial superior of the Spiritan Province of Portugal and Editor of the Spiritan Provincial Newsletter, *Ação Missionária*. He was on mission in Angola during the civil war (1989-1994). He has a degree in Theology (1989) and Social Communication from the Catholic University of Portugal, Lisbon (1998). After post-graduate studies in the Science of Religions in Institut Catholique de Paris (1989), he with distinction defended his 2011 thesis, “Angola. Justiça e Paz nas intervenções da Igreja católica (1989-2002),” in the University for the Humanities and Technology, Lisbon. One time professor in Higher Education in Kuito, Huambo, Lisbon and Porto, he authored various books and articles, including “Missão em Angola” (1997), “Crónicas com Missão” (2005), “Reportagens com Missão” (2014), “Lusofonias com Missão” (2016).

Fr. Manuel Gonçalves, C.S.Sp., born 1935, ordained priest 19 December 1959, died July 29, 2013, left his mark on the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, especially in Portugal and Angola. In 1966 he obtained a License in Systematic Theology from the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome. In 2004, he did a Masters in Mission Sciences in Canada. Manuel was a man of action who influenced people through his spoken word, his writings, his teaching, and his spirituality. The lusophone magazine, *Missão Espiritana*, dedicated a double edition to him in 2015 (Nos. 25/26). These contained tributes by personalities in Portugal and Angola. The opening tribute by the current archbishop of Luanda and president of the Angolan Bishop’s Conference, Msgr. Filomeno Vieira Dias, is particularly noteworthy. Bishop Dias was a student of Manuel and had worked with him in establishing the foundations for the Catholic University of Angola, of which Manuel became the first Rector. Many eulogies attested to his intelligence, persistence, and capacity to bring big projects to fruition. People hailed him as a missionary who had fully embodied the soul of the Angolan people and become one with them. His life’s journey moved from seminaries in Portugal (in all stages of formation and during diverse eras) to seminaries in Angola (Spiritan and diocesan), to the launching and administration of the Catholic University of Angola.

I have pleasure in joining this chorus, as Manuel was Rector when I studied theology at the Catholic University of Portugal in 1985/86 and we had an enduring friendship. Later, following his permanent return to Portugal in 2004, we lived in the same community (2005 and 2006), I working in communications and missionary animation, he as Provincial Archivist and Librarian.

The Formator

Manuel was professor, then director, of the Spiritan Scholasticate in Torre d’Aguilha (1968-1973). It was a troubled time when a significant part of the church was having difficulty accepting and integrating Vatican II which just ended in 1965. Religious life was in crisis everywhere, and any formator had to deal with this crisis in so far as it affected formation. In May 1968, students were rioting in Paris, a phenomenon replicated in academic establishments through the western world, including our major seminaries.

Returning to Portugal in 1982 from mission in Angola,

Tony Neves, C.S.Sp.

*Manuel was formator
par excellence.*

*...true science...
is a “permanent
revolution” of learning.*

Manuel became vice-provincial of Portugal with responsibility for formation. He became Rector at the House of Theology in Lisbon, a post he left when elected to the general council in 1986.

Manuel was formator par excellence. His principal preoccupation was integral formation - of Spiritans, the diocesan clergy, male and female religious, the laity. In Angola, the first priests ordained after independence passed through his hands, some of whom are bishops today: Gabriel Mbilingi C.S.Sp. (now archbishop and President of SECAM, Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar), Filomeno Vieira Dias (now archbishop), Mário Lukunde, Mateus Feliciano Tomás and Estanislau Chindecasse.

João Francisco, C.S.Sp. an Angolan Spiritan, was one of these students. He spoke of Manuel's dedication to the seminarians and his support of their families during the critical time of the civil war when everything was lacking. He found in Manuel a formative mind who respected the freedom of those he formed and who encouraged creativity on the part of each student, insisting very much on self-formation within the framework of the formation program. Archbishop Dias wrote:

What particularly struck us was his dedication to work, to study, to being always available to the students, always alert to the news, and to keeping himself informed. For his former students, his academic life remains an example of a teacher and exemplary researcher in the academy. The rigor which he applied to his research and lecture notes, allied with his knowledge and permanent and all-embracing sense of curiosity, whether in philosophy or theology, history or literature, reveals his enviable qualities. In addition to all the above, oddly enough, was his capacity for communication, his mastery of argumentation, the clarity of his ideas, and the objectivity of his language. It was difficult for a student not to become enchanted by such a brilliant mind, always available and always busy throughout the four corners of the old seminary. I remember the final paragraph of his lecture notes from the epistemology course and which concluded, in line with Karl Popper, that true science, more than just being a linear accumulation of knowledge, is a “permanent revolution” of learning.¹

Msgr. Abílio Ribas, C.S.Sp., Bishop Emeritus of S. Tomé and Príncipe, was the Rector of the Spiritan Major Seminary in Huambo when the car in which they were traveling hit a mine on June 1, 1980. Manuel was a colleague of his under the then system of radical Marxism-Leninism. Msgr Ribas noted Manuel's capacity for work, but above all his courage in facing difficulties and the wisdom with which he was able to prevent the compulsory drafting of seminarians into the military. He defined Manuel as a fighter and organizer who was practical and given to sacrifice for the good of all, and who inspired total confidence from those who worked with him.²

The Scholar

Manuel's leanings as a writer are obvious in the many articles he published, whether specialized or for a broader audience, and covering many decades, from the troubled years after Vatican II to the onset of his illness at the dawn of this third millennium. His first known article, "*Família Cristã gera Filhos Cristãos*" was written on mission in Malanje in 1976,³ a reflection on the importance of Christian family life in the creation of a more humane, just, fraternal and developed society. The context of the article is post-independence Angola and it was written on the basis of his experience as pastor of the cathedral parish in Malanje where he had the pastoral care of a big community of Christian citizens. He also published the following books: *Angola: Reconciliação e Paz*. Edição CEAST, Luanda, 1997; Manuel Goncalves, ed., *A Igreja em Angola entre a guerra e a paz. Documentos Episcopais (1974-1998)*. Edição CEAST, Luanda, 1998.⁵

...a fighter and organizer who was practical and given to sacrifice for the good of all,...

...his concern for mission, his zeal for proclaiming the gospel such that it reaches all people, his clear option for the "little ones" and the poor.

In these, he presented his principal theses, above all in the areas of theology, pastoral practice, and the sociology of religions. They demonstrate his concern for mission, his zeal for proclaiming the gospel such that it reaches all people, his clear option for the "little ones" and the poor. However, he did not exclude anyone, proof of this being the Catholic University of Angola project that, as a private University, would benefit particularly the better-off classes in the country.

In his concern for issues related to inter-religious dialogue as a means to peace, he wrote many reflections about the reasons for and the consequences of the 11th September 2001 attack on New York by Islamic fundamentalists. Question: "What is new about the attack in New York?" Answer: "It is a wake-up call - if that were still necessary - regarding the ongoing problems of intolerance, of recourse to violence, of religious and cultural arrogance, of an inter-cultural conflict, of the need to humanize humanity." On completion of his Master's degree on Mission Sciences in Canada in 2004, he

returned to Portugal where he wrote much about the Synod for Africa, the Encyclical, *God is Love*, of Pope Benedict XVI and the Pauline Year. He also wrote extensively on new forms of religiosity. I highlight one entitled, “What is Erroneous in the Da Vinci Code,” published in Lisbon by Editora Rei dos Livros in 2005.⁶

Archbishop Dias remembers him as a “grand master”:

Manuel Gonçalves, in that confined atmosphere in Huambo, formerly New Lisbon, far away from important cultural centers, from well-stocked libraries, without easy contact with the outside world, dedicated himself to an ingenious work of research and the production of lecture notes for the various philosophical and theological disciplines which he taught. As an option, without going around in circles or being superficial, he addressed the different philosophical and theological treatises, taking them as epistemological principle and hermeneutical key in terms of the denial of God and the theoretical presuppositions underpinning the uselessness of religion.⁷

Pastoral concern was central to Manuel's life.

...he helped out in ministry to the favela communities...

The Missionary

Manuel asked to be sent to one of the front lines for Portuguese Spiritans, Angola, which at that time was still a Portuguese colony. He arrived in Luanda in 1973, before the independence of this Portuguese-speaking country. There followed the 25th April, 1974 revolution in Portugal, which led to the independence, one by one, of Angola, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, Cape Verde, St. Tomé e Príncipe, and East Timor. Manuel was pastor of the cathedral parish in Malanje in the interior of the country when independence came for Angola after 500 years of colonization. That was on November 11, 1975. Manuel asked the young people to ring the church bell!

Pastoral concern was central to Manuel's life. In Portugal, he worked in many parishes during the time he spent in formation. In Angola, he helped out in ministry to the favela communities confided to the Spiritans in the outskirts of Luanda even while coordinating the Pastoral Secretariat of the Bishop's Conference.

The life and mission of Fr. Manuel has a reference date – June 1, 1980. On that day, in a funeral cortege, on the outskirts of Huambo, Angola, a powerful anti-car mine was set off by the front right wheel and exploded. The car was luckily travelling

at walking pace, and as a result, the explosion impacted more on Frs. José Castro and Abílio Ribas who were in the front seats. Fr. Manuel, sitting in the back seat, felt his ears explode, was lifted off his seat, but was not hurt to the same extent as the two occupants of the front seats. These three Spiritans were responsible for the inter-diocesan major seminary in Huambo, the only major seminary that the Marxist-Leninist government did not confiscate. In their hands alone rested the responsibility to train clergy for the country. Following the immediate evacuation of Frs. Ribas and Castro to Portugal for treatment of their very serious injuries, the work of formation fell solely to Fr. Manuel, something he carried out heroically. This event had a lasting effect on him, as well as on Frs. José and Ribas, who were later to become Bishop of St. Tomé and Príncipe.

A compulsive worker with unusual intelligence and capacity for extraordinary work,...

He earned the sobriquet of “the man of impossible missions.”

Fr. Manuel dedicated himself to the program of studies: curriculum programs, teachers, the library, conferences, lecture notes, and bibliographies. He had the grave responsibility of taking care of the humanistic and academic formation of the first batch of priests in independent Angola. It was not an easy task, taking into account the new social, political, and cultural context in which he was asked to carry out this responsibility. It was clear to everyone that the program of studies, as well as seminary formation, needed reformulation. It had to be adapted to the demands of the time, to look upon the young (seminarians) with the awareness that man lives immersed in his own particular context. This was clear for Manuel Gonçalves and he rose to the task.

A compulsive worker with unusual intelligence and capacity for extraordinary work, Fr. Manuel managed to be a professor of various chairs of philosophy and theology, bursar of the major seminary, chaplain to a number of religious communities, preacher of retreats and recollections, writer of articles, and so on. His amazing capacity for work and communication was obvious. This is the only way one can understand how it was possible to run a major seminary in a time of war and help set up a Catholic University in the middle of so many difficulties and adversities of every kind.

Upon his return to Angola in 1993, after a stint as general councilor in Rome (1986-92), Manuel was appointed to Luanda as Director of the Pastoral Secretariat for the Episcopal Conference, where I met him again. Angola recognizes the important and decisive role which Fr. Manuel played in favor of that land, its people and church. He earned the sobriquet of “the man of impossible missions.” The Archbishop of Luanda made the following comment in the name of the Episcopal Conference.

*He was pastor, bishop's
adviser, teacher,
confessor, spiritual
director, preacher of
retreats...*

In Malanje, at the time of independence, [Fr. Manuel] helped with the sad, disorganized, and rushed departure of many, but he understood that, though remaining would be risky, it was the price to be paid by one who had dedicated himself to his Master and Lord, come what may. He understood that, in this new Angolan hour there would be numerous new paths to follow and challenges to overcome in terms of that new stage of mission. Thus, Fr. Manuel Gonçalves, a Portuguese Spiritan, along with that other figure of Spiritan mission in Angola, Fr. Cardona, standing up to winds and storms, became a stalwart in terms of doing what he could in that situation. He was pastor, bishop's adviser, teacher, confessor, spiritual director, preacher of retreats... from the mission house to the Malanje lyceum, he succeeded well in doing what he did, in great empathy with the people of Malanje, a sentiment that always remained even when he was appointed to other missionary locations.⁸

General Councilor in Rome

Manuel's election in 1986 as a general councilor opened a new era of his life and mission. He was in the Pierre Haas's team that supervised the editing of the new *Spiritan Rule of Life*, a result of the 1986 Paris general chapter. This rule was approved by Rome in 1987. The general council wrote a short commentary on the rule, *A Handbook for the Spiritan Rule of Life*, 1987. Manuel was responsible for chapter 2, "Our Mission," pages 16-28. He was a team player who brought spiritual considerations to bear upon even the most mundane decisions of council. One thing marked him especially – exquisite Christian courtesy.⁹ He made the official visitations to many countries where Spiritans work. Angola always remained dear to his heart and he continued to write much about this Portuguese-speaking country, to which he returned immediately following the completion of his mandate as a general councilor, in Rome.

*...fluent in Portuguese,
Spanish, French,
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Manuel Gonçalves, the Person

Many expressions describe Fr. Manuel; being a multi-tasking person is high on the list. He was an exquisitely cultured person, fluent in Portuguese, Spanish, French, English, and Italian, besides the classical languages (Latin and Greek), a man of encyclopedic knowledge, without being pedantic. Whether in a conversation, a conference or a homily, he always

An eloquent example of multi-tasking was exercising at the same time the positions of director, professor, bursar, and spiritual adviser.

He was motivated by a deep faith, a great sense of humanity, and a passion for the poorest and most abandoned...

Manuel's tremendous ability to structure his thoughts quickly, and with ease, to prepare a homily, a conference, a retreat, or a course.

enjoyed explaining the etymology of the most difficult words, irrespective of whether they had a Greek, Latin, Arabic or other root. At times, one would think he was making things up, but no, he really knew what he was saying and would express this with clarity and depth, skills which almost never go together. An eloquent example of multi-tasking was exercising at the same time the positions of director, professor, bursar, and spiritual adviser. He taught with mastery the various disciplines of philosophy and theology, offering his students pages of bibliography that he himself had typed and photocopied – there were as yet no computers and printers.

Manuel was much sought after for conferences on diverse subjects, from philosophy to theology, from spirituality to new religious movements, from liturgy to communications, from pastoral to social doctrine. Many also asked him to write articles for journals and magazines, and commentaries for TV and radio, invitations he never turned down. His advice and suggestions as spiritual director were also much sought after, to the point that he had to say “no” to many. He was frequently requested to give spiritual retreats, something he carried out with great competence and happiness.

Manuel was a man of vision who had the ability to see far and deep. He was motivated by a deep faith, a great sense of humanity, and a passion for the poorest and most abandoned along the lines of our Spiritan founders and the Spiritan missionary tradition. He had a great zeal for evangelization and availed of every opportunity to intervene in favor of people. Neighbors in his native village, near Porto, in Portugal tell of

a wise man, loving, calm, good, and simple. When the war began in Angola, he, always the attentive person, advised me to return to Portugal with my three children, as we were living in great danger, since my husband was a public security police and was not at home to protect us.¹⁰

Benjamin Costa was one of Manuel's seminarians in Huambo. He spoke of him as a man with a huge heart, “a man of a thousand trades: priest, teacher, musician, soccer coach, other functions that demanded his multifaceted presence and service.”

Bernard Ducrot, C.S.Sp. is a French Spiritan who worked in Angola for forty years and who lived and worked with Manuel in Huambo in the 1980s and in Luanda in the 1990s. He speaks of him as a “born teacher” who is always well prepared. He admired Manuel's tremendous ability to structure his thoughts quickly, and with ease, to prepare a homily, a

conference, a retreat, or a course.

His management of the Centre for Spiritan Spirituality in Barcelos (Portugal), as well as that of the Spiritan Provincial Archives in Lisbon, demonstrated two further aspects of his excellent service.

Many of us had the privilege of having him as teacher, director, and spiritual animator. We have the obligation of being worthy of the spiritual and human witness we have inherited from him, and the responsibility to put it to fruitful use in line with what the parable of the talents suggests and demands.

Reverse Mission

Manuel returned permanently from Angola in 2004. He became Director of the Centre of the Holy Spirit and Mission, in the seminary at Silva, Barcelos (2004-2005) and Provincial Archivist in Lisbon (2005-2006). It was there that he began to show early symptoms of Alzheimer's disease, and was moved to Torre d'Aguilha retirement house and later to the more specialized *Anima Una* retirement home in Braga (Fraião) where he passed away on 29th July, 2013, still concerned about the negative impact of certain new forms of piety that, in his opinion and academic evaluation, blur the essentials of faith. His unpublished texts speak about western esotericism and neo-Gnosticism. I was on the road leaving Luanda, on that 29th July, 2013 when I received the shocking news of his death. I was then Provincial of Portugal and visiting the confreres in Angola. I ended up participating in the memorial mass in the cathedral of Luanda, which would bring together various bishops (including Cardinal Nascimento and Msgr. Damião Franklin, archbishop of Luanda), male and female religious and lay people, all paying tribute to Fr. Manuel. I was asked to preach the homily, which I gratefully did.

Homage from the Angolan Bishops

I conclude with the words of Archbishop Dias.

Angola owes a huge debt to this son of Libermann who, in the modern era, wrote in letters of gold the word "mission" in Angola. We hope that many others may follow in the footprints which Fr. Manuel de Sousa Gonçalves left on the church and the world. In the name of CEAST, we are united in paying him this tribute which, for us, is neither a rite nor a convention. It's an obligation, in the knowledge that this gesture is shared by all

those, in Angola, who crossed paths with Fr. Manuel Gonçalves.¹¹

*Tony Neves, C.S.Sp.
Lisbon, Portugal*

¹*Missão Espiritana*, 25/26 (December 2015) 11-12.

²*Missão Espiritana*, 25/26 (December 2015) 20.

³“A Christian Family engenders Christian Children.” In *Ação Missionária*, 433 (January 1976).

⁴*Angola: Reconciliation and Peace*, Luanda, 1997.

⁵*The Church in Angola between War and Peace: Documents of the Episcopal Conference (1974-1998)*. Luanda, 1998.

⁶See *Missão Espiritana*, 25/26 (December 2015) 98-100.

⁷*Missão Espiritana*, 25/26 (December 2015) 11.

⁸*Missão Espiritana*, 25/26 (December 2015) 9.

⁹Added by the editor who was a member of the same general council.

¹⁰*Missão Espiritana*, 25/26 (December 2015) 30.