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Missionary Outreach in Southern Africa

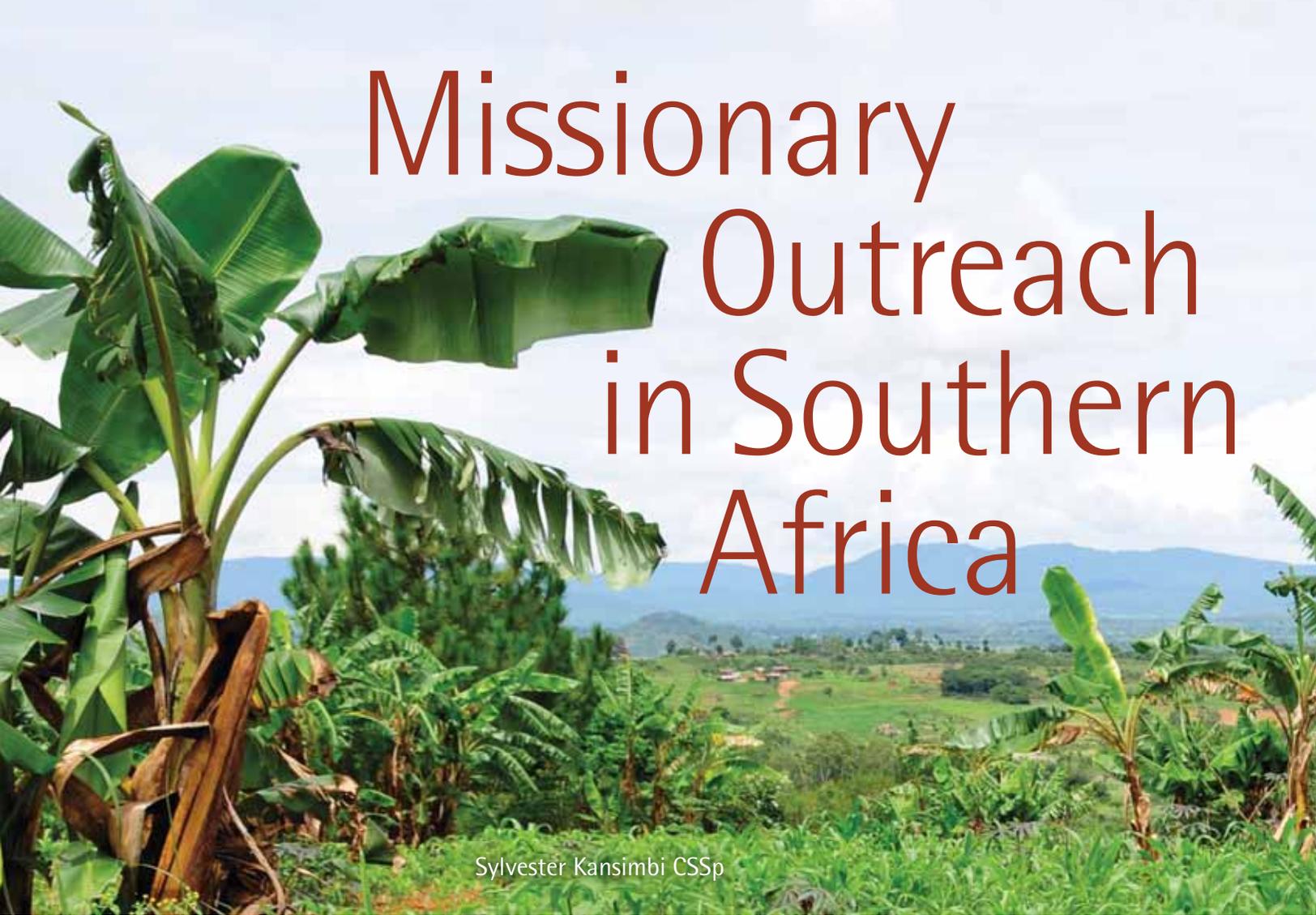
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Missionary Outreach in Southern Africa

Sylvester Kansimbi CSSp

Recently in Malawi, at the ordination of six Spiritans – five deacons and one priest – the Archbishop of Blantyre, Thomas Msusa remarked, “This is a bumper harvest. I have ordained you as deacons. I want to ordain you as priests. I want you to take on some more parishes in the archdiocese.”

Beginnings

The arrival of the Spiritans in Malawi was a result of the Nigerian Biafra war that forced so many missionaries, among whom were the Irish Spiritans, to leave the country. The war broke out on July 6, 1967. It was the culmination of the uneasy peace and stability that had plagued Nigeria since its independence in 1960. A coup and counter coup in 1966 had altered the political equation and destroyed the fragile trust existing among the major ethnic groups. The result was a bloody civil war.

Arrival in Malawi

The Archdiocese of Blantyre appealed for priests in the beginning of 1969. The following July their appeal was received favourably by the Irish Province. The first Spiritan group from Ireland

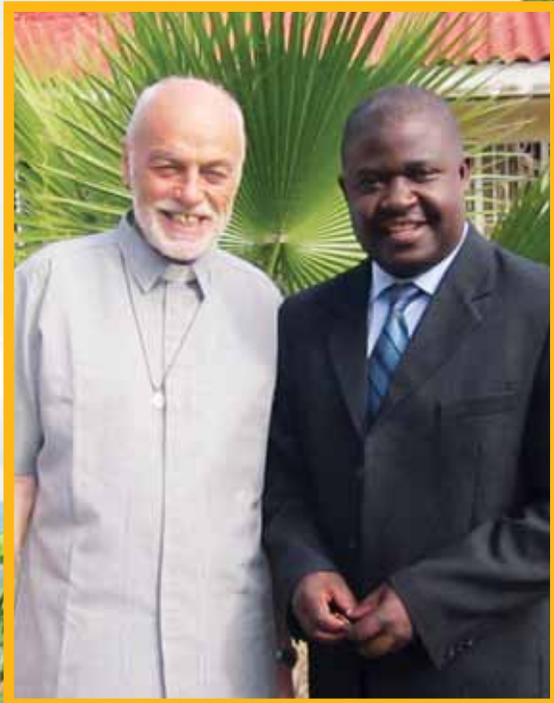
were in Nigeria and you left following the war. You will not leave Malawi. Here your home will be in the hearts of Malawians.” True to these words, Fr Foley worked in Malawi until 2002 when he left to go back to Ireland.

The civil war in Nigeria caused the expansion of the Spiritan missionary outreach. Many missions were opened as a result of that. Malawi was one of them. It became our great home.

arrived in Malawi in 1971. Three more groups came that same year so that by Christmas ten Spiritan priests were ministering in the Archdiocese.

Bishop James Chiona heartily welcomed them. Fr Shay Foley recalled the Bishop’s words to him: “I want you and your Congregation to help in the building of the diocese. Let us weed together in the garden of the Lord. I heard you

Fr. David O’Connor recalls his first months in Malawi: “By the time we arrived in Malawi, Blantyre was the stronghold of the Montfortian Fathers and so our coming in such a big number within a year posed a challenge to them: are the Spiritans coming to take over from us?” “For me,” Fr O’Connor said, “the question of taking over was off base. The Bishop asked for personnel



Above: Sylvester Kansimbi and Locky Flanagan
Right: Conor Kennedy



Fr Conor Kennedy

One of the key people and godfather of many young

and there we were at the service of the local Church.”

Fr David was Superior of the Malawi International Group for over 25 years. I joked about it after he retired to Kimmage Manor, Ireland and he answered: “It was not my choice to serve for such a long time. Instead, I found joy in serving as a priest. My focus was not about me as a person, but about me as a Spiritan called to do the work of Christ.”

Asking Fr Jimmy Murphy about his missionary life in Malawi, he replied, “The Lord has always better plans. After Nigeria, we were tempted to say, “What next? Where to now?” The Holy Spirit can blow us anywhere. We needed the Lord to put things straight for us. In fact, the civil war in Nigeria caused the expansion of the Spiritan missionary outreach. Many missions were opened as a result of that. Malawi was one of them. It became our great home. The language was easy to learn and the people were so friendly.”

TransCanada Province joins the Malawi team

In 1973 Spiritans from the Province of TransCanada joined the Calgary Diocese in a mission outreach to Malawi. At one point, five Spiritans and two diocesan priests were teamed together. The Spiritans included Frs Conor Kennedy, Paddy O’Donohue, Locky Flanagan and Louis Cassidy.

But the Spiritan presence in Chikwawa Diocese did not last long. In 1983, for various reasons, all had left the diocese to return to Canada. All apart from Conor Kennedy. Locky Flanagan, who had left to return to his home Province in Canada, later returned to Malawi and joined the Spiritan group in Blantyre Diocese. He is currently in Harare, Zimbabwe as lecturer and spiritual director at Poullart des Places seminary and Holy Trinity College.

Malawi Spiritans was Fr Conor Kennedy who passed on in 2011 in South Africa. It is not easy to describe Conor! He inspired many young Malawian confreres. He went out of his way for the sake of the Gospel. Some older confreres in Malawi misunderstood him – but the young understood him and followed his way and style of life. He needed no interpreter. He always said what he meant – straightforward. He showed the young the face of Christ and connected them to the charism of the Spiritan Congregation. From him, in collaboration with the other Irish confreres in Malawi, new blood flowed in the Malawi Group. Together with other confreres like Heinz Kuckertz (Germany) and Michael Walsh (Ireland) Conor played a major role in the birth of the South Central African Foundation (SCAF) to which Malawi belongs.

New Blood in the Group – from West and East Africa

Initially, there was a need to get young confreres who would help in the work of formation. In 1993, a request for personnel was sent to the West African Foundation. The response was favourable – in 1994, several West Africans arrived.

Then East African Spiritans from Tanzania and Kenya came to join the group in both formation and various pastoral involvements. The group was further strengthened by the coming of two other Irish confreres specifically for formation work.

Local Vocations and Balaka

The first group studied philosophy at Njiro Seminary (Arusha, Tanzania). Later on South Africa proved to be a more suitable place so those from Njiro were sent there to study in a five year program combining both philosophy and theology.

All these arrivals from Tanzania and South Africa were paving the way for Balaka Inter Congregational Seminary where philosophical studies were in

Fr Conor Kennedy showed the young the face of Christ and connected them to the charism of the Spiritan Congregation.

progress since 1986 as an initiative of the Comboni and Montfort Fathers. Balaka was more central for all the students within the Spiritan South Central African Foundation. So a decision was made to start sending the students there for philosophy.

The first rector was Irish Spiritan Fr Roddy Curran, later joined by Fr Tony O’Boyle. While waiting for their own house the Spiritan students and Fr Roddy stayed with the Carmelite Community. Fr Tony died in Malawi in 2001 and is buried at the entrance to the newly built Spiritan House at Balaka. He is the first to be greeted as one enters the Spiritan compound.

Talking about the Balaka beginnings, Fr Roddy remarked: “It was a great



Sylvester Kansimbi and Locky Flanagan with seminarians.

moment – though challenging. We did not have our own house and we had to stay with the Carmelites for a year or two. In such cases, I assure you that you cannot live the way you want according to your charism and spirituality. But, thank God, within a short time, in 1995 we started the construction of our house. By then there were five students.”

It is believed that Fr Roddy’s starting capital was 1,300 pounds. However, the Montfortian Fathers and Brothers rescued the project and helped the Spiritan House get off the ground. Two years later, the house was opened in October, 1998.

Theological Studies in Tangaza, Nairobi and Holy Trinity College, Zimbabwe

The first Malawian students joined students from Mozambique and Zambia in Nairobi to study theology at Tangaza – by then, a constituent college of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa. Tangaza was a great place in terms of internationality both in the college, where there were over 70 religious

congregations, and as a community at the Spiritan House where there were about 50 students from 15-17 countries.

Then a decision was made to join Holy Trinity College, Zimbabwe for theological studies. In 2004, those who were in Tangaza joined the community in Harare. Currently there are over 20 Spiritan students doing their Second Cycle formation program at Holy Trinity College alongside the Carmelites, Capuchins, Conventual Franciscans, Redemptorists, Marianhill Missionaries and Bethlehem Fathers.

Spiritans Pastoral Involvements

The newly ordained joined many other Malawian confreres to work in various pastoral involvements. Since the arrival of Fr Sylvester Kansimbi, the first Malawian priest in 2001, there are currently 8 Malawian Spiritan priests, 5 deacons, 8 others currently in the Second Cycle, 4 in the novitiate and about 10 in the First Cycle of formation.

Pastoral involvement in Malawi has primarily been in the dioceses of Blantyre and Dedza where Spiritans are working in very large parishes. In these two dioceses, they have sown a unique charism with a Spiritan identity. Many lay people are following a Spiritan way of life and are becoming a backbone of support for Spiritan initiatives and in the formation of Spiritan candidates. ■