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# Spiritan Archbishop Receives Peace Prize

This year the city of Aachen (Aix-la-Chapelle) awarded its annual peace prize to Spiritan Archbishop Dieudonne Nzapalainga of Bangui, Central Africa and Imam Kobine Layama. In May, *Africa Review* wrote:

**D**ieudonne Nzapalainga's debonair manner conceals a tough-minded streak and, at 48, Bangui's archbishop has emerged as a key player in efforts to end the crisis in the Central African Republic. Combined with his charisma, his position as the head of the only functioning institution with a nationwide foothold in a country where the government's authority barely extends beyond the capital, has bestowed him with formidable power.

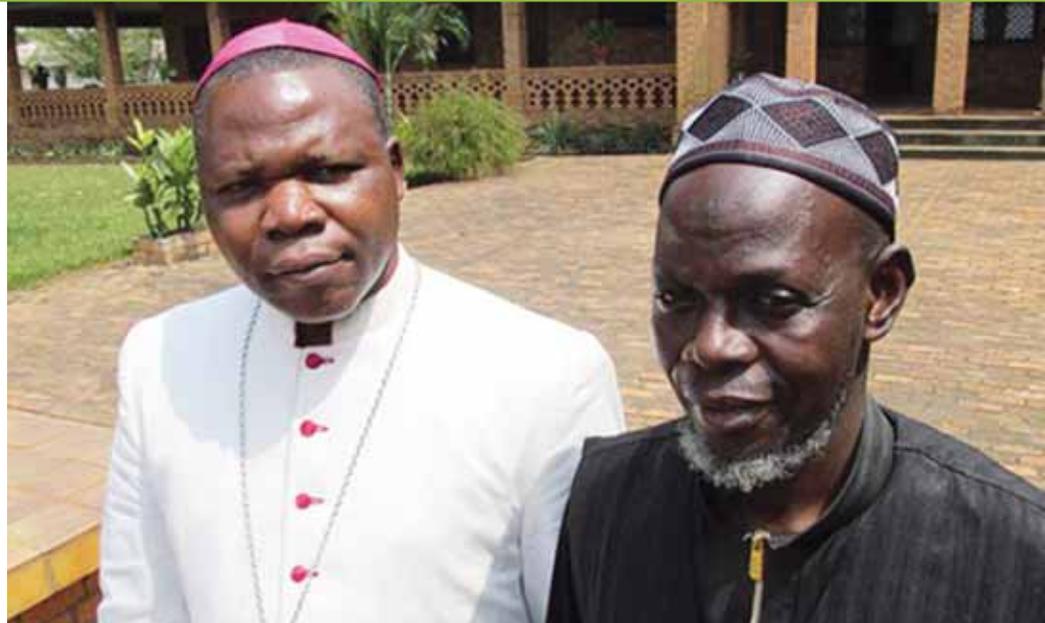
Born in 1967 to a Roman Catholic father and a Protestant mother of modest means, Nzapalainga was appointed archbishop in May 2012. Renowned as a first-rate orator, he was very vocal in condemning the sectarian strife that erupted in the impoverished former French colony in the wake of a coup in March by mostly Muslim rebels.

The population is 80% Christian and the clergy has traditionally played an important role in public life.

Rebels have set up mini-fiefdoms across the country where they have clashed with vigilante groups who started targeting Muslims, often in retaliation for the desecration of Christian property.

## "Weapons do not resolve anything"

The archbishop was swift to denounce "incitement to religious hatred". He now



Archbishop Dieudonne Nzapalainga (left) and Imam Kobine Layama.

spends much of his time criss-crossing the vast land-locked country with the nation's Muslim spiritual leader, Imam Omar Kabine Layama. Their message is that "this is not a sectarian conflict", but one that has been imported by armed gangs from neighbouring Sudan and Chad. "We explained that weapons do not resolve anything. We need to put an end to the violence and talk through existing problems," Nzapalainga said in a recent interview with the *Vatican Insider*.

His charm and style have earned him many fans. The Central African Republic's army is scarcely noted for its discipline, yet soldiers immediately come to attention and salute the archbishop when he goes past. Few members of the government command such allegiance. "Because of his role, he is one of the most powerful men in the country," a diplomat said.

Today, with its dioceses, parishes, schools, medical dispensaries and its humanitarian arm, Caritas, the church

is the only working institution with a national reach, with trained and paid personnel. Where the machinery of state is lacking, the archbishop has become the de facto ruler in the nation of 4.6 million people.

Pope Benedict XVI was reportedly outraged by some of the practices of the Central African clergy including polygamy, that he sent a special commission to clean things up. Nzapalainga, then only 42, was tasked with finishing the work of the commission. Three years later he was made archbishop. "His speech had authority," said a former teacher, "He spoke with a special intensity."

The archbishop uses that gift in French, but above all in Sango, the language of the people. Authority wed to the power of words goes a long way in Africa. Could the archbishop be tempted by politics in a time of crisis? A source close to him replies with a smile, "Earthly power – he practices it every day." ■