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Sylvester Kansimbi

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From traditional religion to Spiritan priest

Sylvester Kansimbi CSSp
Seminary Director

I come from a family that was not Catholic, from a village where there were only two or three Catholics. The majority lived our traditional religion's way of life. It was not a systematic approach, but we knew God. There was a Catholic school about 20 kilometres from my home, run by the Marist Brothers, and I was privileged to go there. I had not been baptized, but I really loved this school. I stayed there until I was seventeen.

Mass was celebrated twice a week in the school and everybody had to go to it. I didn't know the Mass then, but I went to it. The priest saying that Mass was a Spiritan, Fr Conor Kennedy — a very good man, well-known by everyone. Everyone appreciated the work he was doing. What I knew of him was that he was a good priest. In addition to saying Mass in the school, he was very involved in helping the refugees from Mozambique.

When he came to the village crowds of people flocked to him to ask for different things — food, clothing, money. Slowly I too got to know him. I had no interest in the church, but I went to visit him whenever he was there — to see what he was doing.

I was in Forms 1, 2 and 3 in high school, but I was still not a Catholic. One day he asked me, "Do you have a Bible?" Then he gave me the Bible and I started to read it. In school Bible Knowledge was one of our courses.

"You take the readings yourself. Myself, I'll say Mass."

Fr Kennedy said Mass every day, even on his holidays. He always asked me to take the first reading. Then, one day I said to him, "You take the readings yourself. Myself, I'll say Mass." He said, "No, you are not a priest." But I told him, "Even if I'm not a priest, I've been watching what you're doing and I could do that. I will follow the book." He said to me, "First, you need to be a Catholic."

He saw I was interested and he started helping me. I told my parents, "This is my intention — to join Fr Kennedy's

church." My mother was okay. "It's up to you," she said. But my father was against it.

"He wants to be a priest, but he isn't baptized"

During Form 4 Fr Kennedy said I could be baptized at the school, but he would prefer to have the baptism in my village. So he arranged that with my parish priest. The other baptisms at the parish for that year had already taken place. However, the priest arranged it with Fr Kennedy to be in the parish on a particular day. They discussed together my desire to be a priest. They talked about my baptism and who should baptize me. Then Fr Kennedy said, "Here we are, the three of us ... He wants to be a priest, but he isn't baptized ... The three of us together ... we're the church. Let's baptize him right now. We don't need to go to the church." The parish priest said to Fr Kennedy, "You should baptize him."

It was a simple ritual — I think five minutes. There was no chrism. I was asked to choose my Christian name. I wanted to keep my own name but the parish priest said, "That's a pagan name." Then Fr Kennedy said, "Today is the 31st of December — the feast of Saint Sylvester. So you should be called Sylvester."



Sylvester Kansimbi CSSp (back row, fourth from left) and Locky Flanagan CSSp with seminarians.

“I’m thinking I should join you.”

Now that I was baptized we began to talk about me becoming a priest. I got a job and earned some money. But more and more I felt drawn to become a priest and join Fr Kennedy. In the meantime I met a girl at work and I asked myself, “Should I marry her?” But I was more drawn to be a priest. Fr Kennedy and I met again. He asked me, “What are you thinking?” I told him, “I’m thinking I should join you.” He told me to share it with my parents.

So I went back home and my father said, “No. You have no background. You have no roots. If you had been a Catholic for years I would understand. I don’t think you would make it. In the family line, mine and your mother’s, nobody has gone that way. We are not Catholics at all.” My mother said, “Let him go. If he fails he’ll come back.”



Conor
Kennedy
CSSp

Eventually I left my work. I began to meet other guys who were thinking the same way — John Dimba and John Guwa. The Spiritan formation houses were in Tanzania and South Africa. I went to South Africa to try and see if I could make it.

Life in the seminary

The seminary life was totally different from what I had seen Fr Kennedy live. I was used to praying once a day. But in the seminary it was prayer, prayer, prayer, morning, noon and night. Was that going to be my way of life as a priest? It was too much. I liked the learning part, but it was not easy for me to get used to the prayer part.

There were also tensions between whites and blacks in the seminary. For me it was okay, but South African blacks found it very difficult to be with whites. One by one many blacks left. During the second year I got used to the white/black combinations. Later I studied theology in Tangaza, Kenya with a much larger and more international group. It was so enriching. I began to understand how international our Spiritan congregation was.

More than sacramental ministry

Fr Kennedy was different from other priests — they said Mass and heard Confessions, but he was involved with people —

poor people and refugees. His work as a priest went beyond sacramental ministry.

People were attracted to him — not only Catholics but many other people too. His work with the poor was what attracted me to him in the first place. He helped people, he brought people together. I wished to join him especially in his refugee work. I learned that refugee work was not the only kind of Spiritan work. There was youth work and other work. I began to understand that this was religious life. It would be a new way of life for me.

Eventually my parents were slowly attracted to what I was living. People were telling them, “Your son has joined the Catholic Church and you have not.” So my mother began to take catechism classes and within two years she was baptized. In 1993, when my father was sick, he asked to be baptized and soon after his baptism he died.

Bit by bit my friends and other people from the village joined the Catholic Church. Now the whole village is Catholic.

“If [Fr Kennedy] had died in Malawi he would have had a state funeral.” — Minister of Justice, Malawi

I am looking forward to opening the first small Catholic Church in my village this December or maybe next year. Bit by bit my village has been transformed.

Getting ordained

But back to my ordination. I was to be ordained in my village. Fr Shay Foley, our District Superior, had to run up and down to find a Bishop to fit into our timetable for that ordination. Several bishops were not available. Finally a Montfort bishop was available: “You are Holy Ghost Fathers,” he said. “We are relatives. Our founders — Claude Poullart des Places and Grignon de Montfort — were friends. But I don’t ordain people outside my own cathedral.”

Fr Foley pleaded that it would be good for my people that I be ordained at home. But eventually he had to give in. I was ordained 200 kms from home. About twenty people from my parish travelled to my Ordination. But I was able to say my first Mass at home in my own village.

Losing Fr Kennedy

I regret that Fr Kennedy died in South Africa. He was a father to so many people in Malawi. When I told the Minister of Justice that he had died, the Minister replied, “If he had died in Malawi he would have had a state funeral.”

So many people in Malawi were so sad not only when he died, but when they heard he had been cremated and his ashes had been taken to Ireland. They found that hard to understand. He meant so much to the people. ■