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## 50th anniversary of Kongolo martyrs: Killed for their faith

Roland Rivard

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# Killed for their faith

Roland Rivard CSSp

**F**ifty years ago, on January 1, 1962 twenty Spiritans — nineteen Belgians, and one Dutch — were massacred in Kongolo, Democratic Republic of Congo. They were killed not because of their nationality but because of their faith. Only the arrival of a senior officer prevented a second slaughter of two other priests, some sisters and junior seminarians, all of them Africans who had witnessed the killings and were due to be killed that same afternoon.

Two Quebec Spiritans, Fathers Antoine Mercier and Roland Rivard, volunteered to replace their martyred confreres. Roland spent more than sixteen years in Congo-Kinshasa. He recalls the massacre and its follow-up.



## Why this massacre?

The Democratic Republic of Congo, the former Belgian Congo, gained its independence on June 30, 1960. The West was in a Cold War with Russia; the Congolese officers in charge of the executions had been trained in Russia. In addition, the political separation of mineral-rich Katanga Province from the rest of the Congo, financed by external sources and led by Moïse Tshombé, was under way. The Kongolo Spiritans were caught between two fires: the town was just north of Katanga Province and the advancing Congolese soldiers came through it on their journey south to retake Katanga.

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Our confreres could have left, like most of the colonialists. The letters they wrote at that time show how aware they were of what it might mean for them to stay put. Fr Jean-Marie Godefroid wrote: “Our people are hungry and afraid because we border on rebel territory. We live the spirit of Advent: hungry and destitute we have only the Lord to hope in. Jesus alone saves .... Next week we begin exams — at least the seminarians do. As to the Final Exam before our Saviour, we don’t know whether it will come soon or later. May the Prince of Peace come quickly to change people’s hearts.”

An opportunity to escape across the Congo river with the Katanga soldiers and almost the whole population came on December 30 1961. But the Spiritans chose to remain to

assist people from other tribes, who couldn’t flee and who had to take refuge where they were. In the most difficult of times they unanimously chose to stay with the people who had welcomed them. That choice cost them their lives. They were stabbed to death.

Along with them remained two Congolese priests — one of them Msgr Kabwe, the Vicar General — thirty religious sisters, sixty seminarians, old people, mothers and young children, a French doctor and an old Belgian trader married to a Congolese woman. The Spiritans knew the danger they were in, but they were unwilling to abandon all these people.

Fr Jules Darmont, the only survivor of the massacre, wrote: “We entrusted ourselves to Providence, asking to be saved or to be given the strength to die as priests. Each one of us had a ritual and the Holy Oils. Some priests consumed the Holy Communion hosts from the different tabernacles so as to empty them.”

## Soldiers arrive

On December 31 the Congolese soldiers entered the deserted village of Kongolo. In the afternoon they went to the diocesan offices where our confreres had gathered along with those who were unable to escape. After verifying each person’s identity and making sure that there were neither arms nor Katangan soldiers there, they assured them that nothing would happen to them. But they didn’t count on a small group of soldiers who wanted at all costs to kill both missionaries and foreigners.

In the evening two trucks arrived to round up the Spiritans, the doctor, the trader, the sisters and the junior seminarians. They had to repeat slogans such as “Vive Lumumba”, “Lumumba is God”, “Death to Tshombé”. Then each group

was separated into different cells. The Sisters had to endure continuous nightlong harassment and attempted rape. They were especially heroic — ready to die rather than give in.

## Execution

Next morning the prisoners were subjected to various interrogations. They were scourged with twelve lashes of a chicotte (a leather whip of hippotamus skin made supple with alcohol). Fr Postelmans said to his confreres: “Well, my friends, it’s New Year’s Day ... Happy New Year.” About 9:00 a.m. they were brought out once more, lined up one behind the other, and brought towards the river, frequently beaten as they shuffled along. A soldier, who wanted to save at least one priest, threw himself on Fr Jules Darmont and brought him into solitary confinement. The other twenty Spiritans, the doctor and the businessman were all killed.

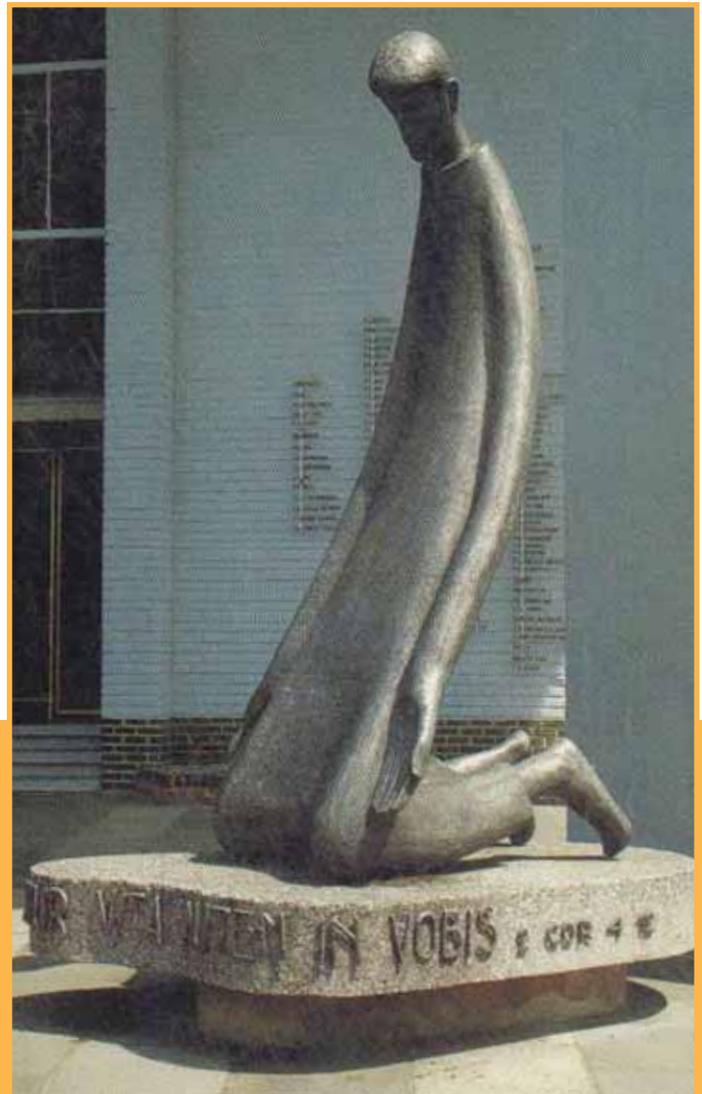
Witnesses have said that while the soldiers who committed this crime did so because of their hatred of religion, other soldiers tried to prevent this happening.

Msgr Kabwe was forced to take part in a mock trial. When the missionaries went out to be executed, he blessed them as they passed by. He would have wished to follow them to death, but the soldiers prevented him from doing so. Later, he wrote: “If there are moments in life when one is in a state of perfect charity, it was such a moment. That’s what I thought as I observed each one’s attitude: truly lambs among a band of wolves. I pictured them as martyrs to duty, of fidelity to duty. The final blessing I gave them was an *au revoir*.”

Fr Jules Darmont should have been the first to be executed — he was military chaplain to the Katanga soldiers. But in

spite of that he was the first to be saved. From his cell he cried out, “I too want to die.” He finally escaped from Kongolo on January 23. His witness enabled the world to know the full extent of the massacre. This killing resounded across the world. Martyrdom had seemed such a thing of the past. He returned to Kongolo the following August and was responsible for the memorial church to the Kongolo martyrs. I was pastor of that parish from 1976-1979. ■

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## Gentinnes memorial

A memorial was constructed in Gentinnes, Belgium and solemnly consecrated on May 7, 1967. All the Belgian Spiritan seminarians who were there at the time of the martyrdom eventually left the seminary. The holocaust did not attract any further Spiritan candidates. Several Belgian Spiritans asked to be sent to the Congo “to fill in the gaps” — a very generous gesture, but one that drained the home front. Kongolo itself has undergone many turbulences and life has not yet settled down there.

But things are looking up — a new Spiritan beginning is underway with thirty overseas missionaries and forty young Spiritans in formation. Kongolo itself has a solid African clergy alongside Sisters and some missionaries.

The Gentinnes memorial doesn’t draw crowds, but it remains an inspiration for retreatants and passers-by. Many young people are struck by the open hands of the missionary statue: open hands give and receive, bless and welcome, reconcile and reassure.

“Missionaries are neither heroes nor adventurers, but quite ordinary people, entrusted with the most splendid, but also perhaps the most demanding assignment.” — Jean-Marie Godefroid, one of the Twenty.

**The Kongolo Memorial at Gentinnes, Belgium :**  
“The missionary offering his life”  
(sculpture by R. Mailleux)