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## FROM MOZAMBICAN REFUGEE TO A SPIRITAN MISSIONARY

João Luis Dimba,  
C.S.Sp.

Forced to flee his war-torn native country of Mozambique in 1986, João Luis Dimba became the first Mozambican Spiritan priest on May 18, 2002. He returned to Malawi where he had lived as a refugee to take up pastoral ministry in the parish of Thunga, later serving as Vocations and Postulancy Director, and Councillor for Formation in the South Central African Foundation (SCAF). On December 12, 2006, he was appointed Superior of SCAF by the Spiritan General Council and is now based in South Africa.

*Several of my relatives,  
friends, and teachers were  
murdered.*

### *EARLY YEARS*

I am João Luis Dimba, a Mozambican by nationality, and I was born 38 years ago in the Angonia district of the north-western province of Mozambique called Tete. I was born of Maria Inez Abel and Luis Matias Dimba.

I started school at the tender age of five. My father, a teacher by profession, was keen to have his own children begin school at an early age and set the example in the local community. I completed my secondary school education when I was just seventeen and was ready to go to pre-university. The thought of priesthood had bothered me for some time. Perhaps it was more than just a thought; a desire to become a priest had entered my heart on seeing the splendid outfit of the bishop on the day of my First Communion.

In 1986, the civil war between the ruling FRELIMO<sup>1</sup> government and the rebel group RENAMO<sup>2</sup> reached our district and many people were killed. The rebels attacked small towns and villages, pillaging and looting as they went. They even attacked schools, killing many school children and teachers. Several of my relatives, friends, and teachers were murdered. Statistics indicate that more than a million people died during the seventeen-year civil war in Mozambique. Many Mozambicans were forced to flee to the neighboring countries of South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, and Tanzania. In a bid to protect the nation, the FRELIMO had resorted to recruiting and training school children and college students as soldiers. While at secondary school, I received military training myself and became familiar with machine guns and other weapons of war.

### *SEPARATION FROM MY FAMILY*

When I finished my school exams in 1986 I was unable to return home to my parents. Our village was about 80 km from the school and it had already been visited and vandalized several times by the RENAMO rebels. My parents had fled to Malawi desperately seeking asylum and many of my relatives and friends in neighboring villages had been killed. I was to be separated from my family for three years. I did not know it then, but my next reunion with my parents and siblings would take place in a

refugee camp in Malawi, the country of refuge for half a million Mozambicans.

*I fled through the forest  
for three days and nights.*

*Very few wanted to hear  
my story...*

Eventually, Villa Ulongue, the small town where our school was located, came under attack. Several innocent people were killed; others were forced to carry the spoils from the town to rebel military bases, never to return. There were rumors that some government forces had killed two Jesuit priests, Frs. João de Deus Kamtedza and Silvio Morreira. In fear for my safety I fled through the forest for three days and nights. Finally, I arrived in Malawi with nothing but a pair of trousers and a shirt. I managed to get occasional work to help me survive but suffered the rejection and discrimination well known to those who have found themselves refugees in a foreign country. Very few wanted to hear my story but I was sure that the wise and reflective could read the misery written on my face. The kindness of three people in Dedza West, Ceasario Kabango, Boniface Kunyengana, and Malisela Kalasa, will remain with me for ever. They understood exactly what I was suffering and gave me courage and hope. I shared my story and my shattered dreams with them and felt accepted and understood. It was through chatting with them that the idea of learning English with a view to joining religious life matured.

#### **CULTURE SHOCK**

James W. Gibson defines culture shock as “the psychological reaction of stress that sometimes occurs when an individual enters a culture very different from their own.”<sup>3</sup> Malawi was a British protectorate while Mozambique had been a Portuguese colony. The former had been a capitalist country since its independence, while the latter, under Samora Machel,<sup>4</sup> became a communist country. Despite the fact that the people of these neighboring countries were basically *Bantu*,<sup>5</sup> the two countries held two different socio-political and religious world-views. Culture shock describes well the experience of those early years in Malawi. I found myself in a foreign land without any prior preparation, unable to communicate adequately, worn down by the sense of loss of family, friends, relatives, hopes, possessions, national and personal pride. I knew no English and could only speak a few words and phrases in the Nyanja language. Eventually, encouraged by my three newfound friends, I contacted the headmaster of a local school, Mr. Dondwe, to see if I could enroll for English classes. But the problem was where to get the money needed for the course. “Where there is a will there is a way,” the saying goes. I went into the forests on the frontier of Mozambique, five km from the refugee camp, where I collected firewood which I sold to

the teachers in the local schools. After I had done this a number of times I eventually managed to put together the required \$8.00 for enrolment.

*As a refugee I had no documentation, no study permit, and no defense.*

Six months into my English studies at Chimphalika, the Malawi police seized me and demanded my documents and a study permit. As a refugee I had no documentation, no study permit, and no defense. Consequently, I was removed from the school and sent back to the camp where I stayed for five months, wondering what the future would hold. I heard people speak of a Spiritan priest, Fr. Conor Kennedy, who was involved in advocacy work on behalf of refugees. I was told that for close to three years he had single-handedly solicited funds for feeding them and tried to give them back their human dignity. I decided to meet this man and tell him my story. He managed to get me a study permit and soon I was back to my English classes, this time in a school built by the same Fr. Kennedy.

*...a person is a person because of other persons.*

This was to mark the beginning of a slow but sure resettlement. During school holidays I obtained some work from the Marist Brothers at Mtendere Secondary School, mostly sweeping classrooms and dusting library shelves. It was there that I met a fellow Mozambican refugee, a student called Semente, who had an odyssey similar to mine. My joy was unimaginable. As the Zulu proverb wisely says, “*umuntu ngumuntu, ngabantu,*” which can be translated as “*a person is a person because of other persons.*” Semente suggested to me to go to Lilongwe, the capital city, to meet the resident representative of the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) and see if he could provide funds for my English studies and upkeep. I did this with maximum haste and within days I was on the list of refugee students who enjoyed all the support of the UNHCR. They sponsored me in a correspondence course in English with the Rapid Results College of London; they paid my rent, gave me food and clothing, and made me feel human again. Eventually, with the help of Fr. Kennedy and that of the UNHCR, I managed to trace my family and siblings and I was reunited with them after three years of separation.

#### **ENTERING THE SPIRITAN FAMILY**

I had admired the vestments of the bishop on the day of my First Communion back home in Mozambique, but little did I imagine that this seemingly childish admiration would, after a long journey over violent waters, translate into a desire to join the Spiritan family. Dreams can start in such simple and unsophisticated ways! In my youth I was not aware of the fact

that there are many religious congregations; indeed I hardly knew of the distinction between diocesan and religious priesthood. It seems rather humorous now but I had always thought that Catholic priests were called Jesuits. I had wrongly deduced this from the fact that Jesuits were the missionaries who evangelized our area in Mozambique. It was the war and the chance encounter with Fr. Conor Kennedy that would eventually lead me to the Spiritan family. As St Paul wrote to the Romans: “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called to his purpose.”<sup>6</sup> In particular, it was Fr. Kennedy’s untiring and dedicated service to the refugees from my native country and to the poor in his own parish that inspired and attracted me.

*...after eight months I was more convinced than ever that I wanted to become a Spiritan.*

In 1988 I decided go and meet Fr. Kennedy, this time not as a refugee needing help to survive my ordeal but as a young man aspiring to join the congregation to which he belonged. Fr. Kennedy did not immediately encourage me to join the Spiritans. Rather, he gave me a list of other congregations and told me to study their various charisms and give it a plenty of thought before coming to see him again. I did as he asked, but after eight months I was more convinced than ever that I wanted to become a Spiritan. It was not merely because Fr. Kennedy had helped me but because I wanted to be as helpful to others, in a Spiritan way, as he was to so many suffering people that had been squeezed to society’s periphery. Fr. Kennedy then began to take my request seriously and invited me to various “Come and See” gatherings with other young Malawian men who were also aspiring to join the Spiritans. I submitted my official application to the Vocations Director in 1990 and was accepted into the Spiritan formation program.

#### ***ANOTHER ARDUOUS JOURNEY***

*I had to learn anew the meaning of community living.*

In 1991 I was sent to South Africa for a two-year pre-novitiate program designed to help young men from Lesotho, South Africa, and Malawi to discern their vocation to the missionary life. Turning a refugee into a missionary needed the patience of my formators, my own pliability, and especially the help of God’s grace. I had to learn anew the meaning of community living after years of fending for myself in order to survive. My greatest hope lay in the encouraging attitude of those entrusted with my formation: Frs. John Moriarty, Bernhard Wiederkehr, Helmut Gerads, Heinz Kuckertz, Alberto dos Anjos Coelho, and the late Muziwakhe Michael Sibeko. I also drew encouragement from the biblical stories of the call of Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and the like.

*It was not an easy road.*

It was not an easy road. During my years of formation I met many different personalities. Some of them were suspicious of my call, wondering if I had joined the Spiritans in search of security. Others seemed to interpret everything I did in the light of the fact that I was a refugee and somehow they ensured that I would never forget my background. Some asked questions about my ordeal but more out of intrusive curiosity, it seemed, than genuine interest. On many occasions I felt insecure and unaccepted and sometimes reacted with anger and frustration. But I had learnt from my previous hardships that self-pity would not take me anywhere. Real self-affirmation and a positive regard of myself had come only after repeated failure to understand that, although people had the right to hold whatever opinions they wished of me, in the final analysis it was I alone who had the choice of becoming the person I wanted to be. I knew I wanted to be a Spiritan and so obstacles on the road were both tests of my humility and challenges to overcome.

*João Luis Dimba...  
the first Mozambican  
Spiritan.*

Overall, I spent six years in formation in South Africa, two years of pre-novitiate, a year of novitiate, two years of Philosophy and a year of pastoral experience. I went to Tangaza College, Nairobi, Kenya, for four years of Theology and, in March 2001, I was sent to Zambia where I served as a deacon for close to a year. Altogether, my journey to becoming a Spiritan missionary took me eleven years. Finally, on May 18, 2002, I was ordained as a Spiritan religious priest by Bishop Rémi Ste-Marie of Dedza diocese in the frontier parish of Mzama, in the presence of my family members. It was a very emotional day. My Superior, Fr. Kuckertz, pointed out that “God can write straight on crooked lines,” but it was Fr. Kennedy who touched the deepest chord in my heart when he announced to the assembly that João Luis Dimba had become the first Mozambican Spiritan.

#### **Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup> The Mozambican Liberation Front.

<sup>2</sup> The Mozambican National Resistance.

<sup>3</sup> James W. Gibson and Michael S Hanna, *Introduction to Human Communication* (Dubuque: WC. Brown Publishers, 1992), 417.

<sup>4</sup> Samora Moisés Machel was the first President of the independent Mozambique.

<sup>5</sup> Bantu: a group of people believed to have originated from the Congo basin and to have migrated into Central, Eastern, and Southern Africa. Their languages have a common root and their cultures suggest a common origin.

<sup>6</sup> The Bible, Revised Standard Version, Rom 8:26.