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# From Mozambican Refugee to Spiritan Missionary

João Luis Dimba CSSp

## MOZAMBIQUE

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.

### Civil war

In 1986, the civil war between the ruling Frelimo government and the rebel group Renamo reached our district. 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 Dedze 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

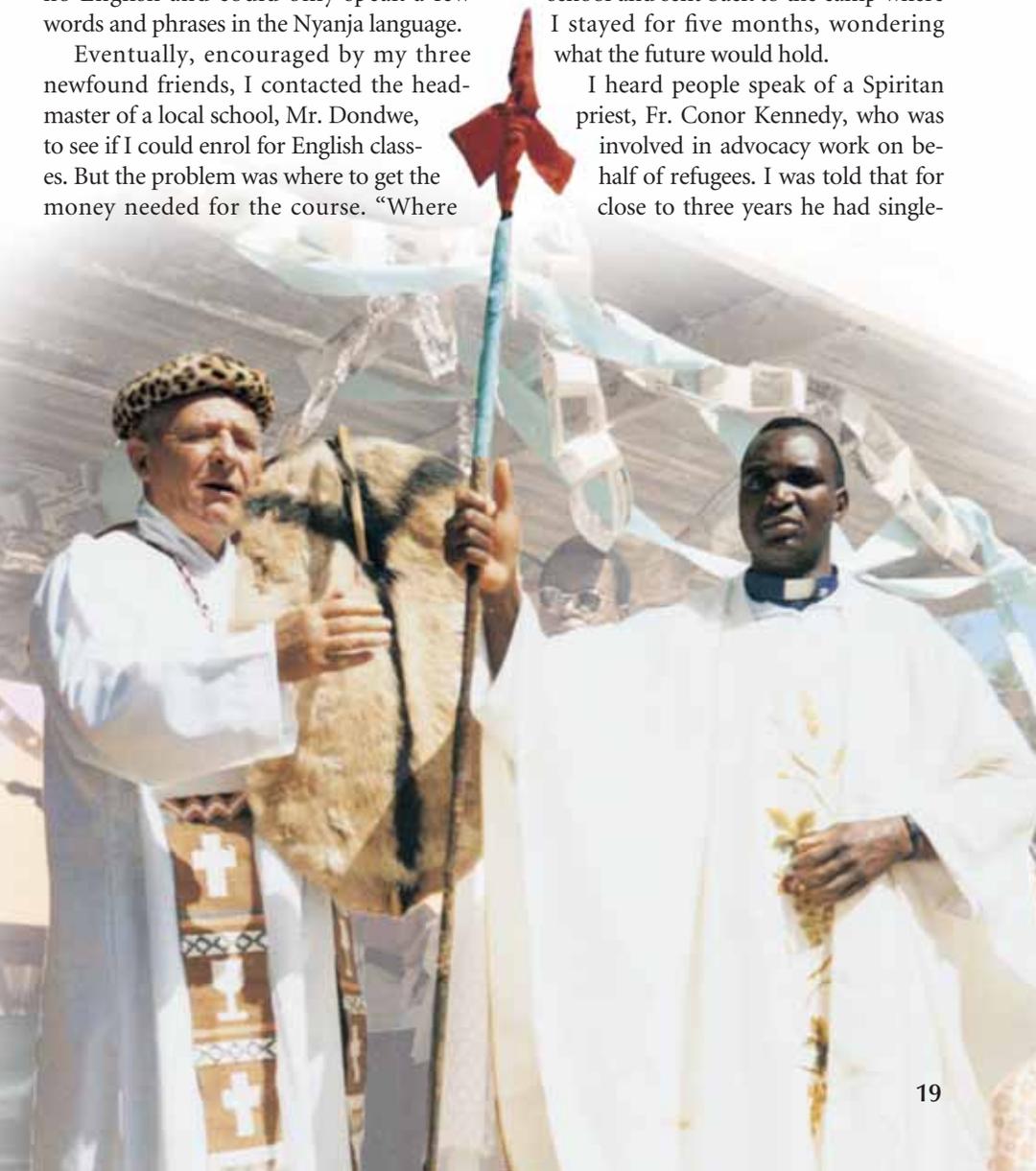
I found myself in a foreign land without any prior preparation, unable to communicate adequately, worn down by the loss of family, friends, relatives, hopes, possessions, national and personal pride. I knew no English and could only speak a few words and phrases in the Nyanja language.

Eventually, encouraged by my three newfound friends, I contacted the headmaster of a local school, Mr. Dondwe, to see if I could enrol 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 kilometres from the refuge 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.

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 Schjool, 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 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 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 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

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in Mozambique,. It was the war and the chance encounter with Fr. Conor Kennedy that would eventually lead me to the Spiritan family. 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.

In 1988 I decided to go and meet Fr. Kennedy again, 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 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**

In 1991 I was sent to South Africa for two-year pre-novitiate program. 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. 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. 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 assumed 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 self regard 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.

Overall, I spent six years in formation in South Africa. 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. Fr. Kennedy touched the deepest chord in my heart when he announced to the assembly that João Luis Dimba had become the first Mozambican Spiritan. ■

#### **Joseph Lam Nguyen (USA)**

A passion for upholding truth, practicing law and advocating for those who have no voice has always spoken clearly and loudly to me. This passion started with my own experience of being a refugee. As a stranger and immigrant in the United States from Vietnam I experienced and witnessed discrimination in my educational journey, as well as in the workplace. It is my prayer and hope that I can contribute a little by standing with and advocating for the poor, the marginalized and those who are abandoned, abused and discriminated against.