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Struggling with Chichewa: A Great Challenge!

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“Is the only solution to close the door?”

On October 19 last, a dozen Iranians who fled the totalitarian regime in their country and who had lived without documents for several years in Belgium, together with another 110 people without documents from more than twenty countries, occupied the Saint Boniface Church in Ixelles, Brussels. The priest in charge, Spiritan Norbert Maréchal, with the support of the local bishop and the parish council gave them a warm welcome.

In a letter to the Belgium Foreign Minister, Norbert explained his reason for receiving the asylum seekers:

“I allowed the asylum seekers to stay in the church because of their increasing anxiety: the police had been invading the centres where they stayed and they were being expelled before a decision on their status had been handed down by the State Council...”

Let me assure you that I take no pleasure in being “invaded” but is the only solution to close the door?....

Having lived myself for many years in another country (even though with the necessary documents), I know how this experience of not being recognized or accepted is painful. This is even worse when you are not legally recognized.

It is for this reason that I respect them and the demands they make. Some have been here between one and twelve years and they have been waiting so long...

Evidently my perspective here is a human one. However one principle is central for me; “law has been made for people, not people for law”. This is evident in the gospels, but isn’t it also a sound human principle? After three months should they not be listened to and treated humanely?”

Eventually on March 16, after five months’ occupation of the church and twenty days into a hunger strike, the asylum seekers were granted permission to stay in Belgium for a year by the Foreign Ministry while their requests for asylum are being re-examined case by case.

Spiritan Justice and Peace newsletter

A Great Challenge!

land is a playground for most of our children. After school, they come to play football and volleyball. They make many small pitches to accommodate their several teams. My hope was to chat and joke with the children as I always did at home. But that language barrier!

Learning Chichewa

Malawi is officially English-speaking, but the local language Chichewa is most commonly used. And without it, I’m afraid one has little or nothing to offer to the Malawi Church. In fact, a confrere, attempting to encourage me to learn the local language, told me that the use of English in the Church had been banned in Malawi. I had no reason to doubt him since even the National Anthem was sung in Chichewa. But later I realized that at least two out of the thirty-seven parishes in the Archdiocese of Blantyre have Mass in English on Sundays.

My teachers

Some teachers at Blantyre secondary school began giving me language lessons to

enable me to start reading the Mass. After their introduction, reading gave me few problems. But speaking was a hard nut to crack. When Fr. Eugene Oguamanam, CSSp, one of the lecturers at the Balaka Intercongregational Seminary visited Ndirande for a weekend, he gave me an insight: “Dom, don’t feel shy to speak. Formulate your own Chichewa and speak it. People will learn to understand you. That’s what I did while learning Zulu in South Africa.”

Our Catechist helps translate a short sermon for me every Sunday. And I make sure I read it as faithfully as possible. Sometimes people get disappointed as my sermons finish just when they are about to get a point or two. But some have come to love them very much. They say, “Fr. Dominic’s Masses are brief and nice.” At first I used to feel sad when I discovered that I had failed to pronounce a certain word correctly. But now I am growing a thick skin. I don’t worry. I console myself with the thought that even the English language has varieties of pronunciation. Someday people will say, “This is Fr. Dominic’s Chichewa.” ■