

EDITORIAL

La Salette

VISION & MISSION



By Fr. Thomas Vellappallil, ms

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Dear Co-missioners,

The first eight Swiss La Salette missionaries arrived in Angola in 1946. As they grew, the mission was elevated to the status of a Region in 1964 and became a Province in 2013. First and foremost, the Swiss La Salette Missionaries committed themselves to share the message of reconciliation, which still remains a great challenge for Angola. The wounds of war remain open; much more time will be needed before they are healed. The war of arms and bombs may be over, but the war of cultural, tribal and ethnic prejudice continues.

Today, La Salette in Angola has 85 priests, 6 deacons, 2 brothers, 6 novices and 150 seminarians in various levels of formation. These are the ministries served by members of the Angolan Province: in Angola: Mission of Catumbela, Mission of Hanha, Mission of Malongo, Mission of Ndunde-Ganda, Mission of Tchindjendje, Mission of Cubal, Mission of Kalukembe, Mission of Kola, Mission of Mussolo, Parish of Mapunda, Parish of Forte and the Community of Huambo. Outside the country: Opuwo and Omuthiya in Namibia and Porto in Portugal. Rev. Pedro shares with us the experience of his visit to the newest mission opened in Kapenda Kamulemba in 2013.



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La Salette Mission of Angola -The challenges of going to the periphery
Rev. Pedro Chingandu, MS (Provincial Superior)

I grew up in the Meheba Refugee Camp in Zambia. My family arrived there when I was 12 years old. My first year in the camp was traumatic; we had no house. The Zambian government had designated a big forest area where the UN settled refugees arriving from Angola and the current Democratic Republic of Congo. The refugee camp was divided by one main road and subdivided by 26 side roads. Each road was further partitioned into plots of land 100 meters wide; one plot was allotted to each family. Once registered, my family was handed a card with the road and house numbers. Our road was 19 and 88 was our house number. Having received our survival kit which consisted of water buckets, hoes, blankets, and some food, we decided to search for our new home. We walked for 3 hours and finally found a plate nailed on a tree with number 88 written on it. Our house was under a tree. The food we received from the UN was meant to last a week; it only lasted three days. Unfortunately 3 years after our arrival at the camp my father fell from a tree and died. I was 15. The death of my father quickly turned me into an adult as I had to make sure my family (mother and sisters) had their basic needs satisfied. I learned how to catch fish, make traps to catch animals, hunt for birds, thatch houses, and make baskets out of bamboo.

Slowly our lives stabilized and I went back to school. The hardest part was learning English. I persisted and soon was at the top of my class. The only priest who followed the Angolan refugees was a La Salette missionary. I desired to be a priest and, when I came to know him, he encouraged me. With his help I entered the nearby minor seminary and completed my philosophical studies. By then, I wanted to be a La Salette missionary. Returning to Angola was out of the question, so he arranged to send me to the La Salettes in Brazil to study theology. When I arrived in Brazil, Theology of Liberation was the order of the day in Latin America. Many Religious Congregations had left the comfort of their classic convents to move to the peripheries of the cities in order to be with the poor and live their precarious life. Many religious actually joined social movements to fight for the rights of the poor to have land and a decent life. La Salettes in Brazil were living in this same euphoria. They had moved their formation houses to the periphery where students lived in small houses among the people. My years in Brazil became a living classroom that prepared me to face many challenges once I returned to my own country.



In 2013 La Salette Missionaries in Angola opened a new mission in Kapenda Kamulemba located in a northeastern Angolan Province (state). For more than 60 years the La Salette presence in Angola had been restricted mainly to working among the Ovimbundu people of south-central Angola. Besides being distant from other La Salette communities, this mission in Kapenda Kamulemba posed three other daunting challenges: 1. People living there are of a different ethnicity - Lunda Tchokwes. Missionaries would now face a new language and cultural challenges. 2. Kapenda Kamulemba had not had a resident catholic priest since its independence in 1975 – that's 38 years! Consequently, evangelization efforts would have to begin all over again. 3. Located in a diamond rich area, one would suppose the people would lack for nothing. Quite to the contrary; they were steeped in poverty.

A few years later, when I became Provincial, I decided to spend the Easter Triduum with La Salettes already established in this isolated missionary district. From the provincial house to Kapenda Kamulemba travel entailed a grueling 13 hour trip over 500 miles on a road that stretches across 4 provinces (states). My coming to visit our missionaries was not only a fraternal boost, but also a pastoral help in celebrating the Resurrection of Christ. The missionaries ministered to a territory radiating for over 100 miles in all directions from their central post – and they have no vehicle. The next day, Holy Thursday, with my car we covered over 100 miles on similarly brutal roads, dropping off one priest at a town, then proceeding to the next town, where, after hearing over 200 confessions, Mass would be celebrated. That way we could celebrate with three communities. Back at the central house, we would share a frugal meal and get a few hours of sleep to gain strength for the next day's activities. This scenario was repeated each day during the Paschal Triduum. Can you imagine our physical exhaustion at the end of their activities? Simply strenuous! Yes, the spirit felt strong, but the body could hardly stand it. The communities I visited opened my eyes. After more than 25 years of civil war, the country was devastated; neighborhoods were only clusters of houses built haphazardly with no access roads; sanitation was primitive; paths, not roads, crisscrossed them, the socio-economic life was miserable – well below the poverty level; few children attended school; unable to get jobs, many people clandestinely mined diamond kimberlites and sold them when they could. You had to see it to believe it!



During the civil war travel was dangerous. The presence of Catholic missionaries had been limited to Provincial Capital areas, and places like Kapenda Kamulemba had been without spiritual guidance for 38 years. It was in 2013 with the arrival of La Salette Missionaries that, thank God, faith began to be revived. Catholic religious activities began gaining momentum, and the number of Christians in this area had been rising sharply. Even local political authorities recognized the importance of the presence of catholic missionaries in their municipalities and communes, On this trip, during eucharistic celebrations I felt the vibration of the people when they saw missionaries arrive. Joy overflowed with effusive greetings and singing. And although sadness came with each departure, I will forever keep in my heart those moments of joy expressed by the people - the affection and respect they have for our missionaries. In fact, it is this enthusiasm that the people expressed for the presence of missionaries that ultimately turned the fatigue of those long and tortuous journeys into invigorating motivation.

I came back from Kapenda Kamulemba, however, very outraged at social, economic, and spiritual conditions I encountered. I saw so many basic needs unfulfilled and manifested anxiety on the part of christians. I also felt too small, as the Provincial of a Missionary Congregation, for the challenges set before me. I had just experienced another Angola so different from the one I was accustomed to. My indignation was not debilitating but rather motivating. The presence of La Salette Missionaries in Kapenda Kamulemba is a sign of hope and joy for this people of God. However, the presence of just two missionaries is hardly enough to face the pastoral challenges of a region stretching over 200 miles. Most people of the region are poor and cannot provide the economic and financial support the missionaries need. Consequently external support is necessary for them to carry out their apostolate. Sunday collections barely reach the equivalent \$50.00. I know that many young members of the La Salette Province of Angola worry about our future. They are aware of our financial limitations which cause us to refuse the invitation to take up new apostolates on the periphery. They worry about the survival of our apostolates where basic needs cannot be met. Yet they know God will never abandon us, and that we therefore should never turn our back on the poor who have nothing to give. God will provide. Guess what? We are still hanging in there. God is awesome!



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