

EDITORIAL

La Salette

VISION & MISSION



By Fr. Thomas Velloppallil, ms

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Dear Co-missioners,

Angola is considered the precious jewel of Africa. Angola is a large country with over 30 million people and several different religions, languages and tribes. There are about 1,000 religious communities, most of which are Christian. Roman Catholics constitute about half of the population. It is the 7th largest country on the continent boarded by Namibia to the south, Republic of Congo to the north, Zambia to the east, and the Atlantic Ocean to the west. It was a former Portuguese colony from 1484 until the decolonization in November 1975. Angola is still recovering from 27 years of the civil war that plagued the country from its independence in 1975 to 2002. The Capital and the largest city of Angola is Luanda. Portuguese is the official language, spoken by 80% of the population as the primary or secondary language. Kikongo, Umbundu and Kimbundu are the most popular indigenous languages of the country. Despite extensive oil and gas resources, diamonds and rich agricultural land, Angola remains poor. Angola's economic growth is highly uneven, with most of the nation's wealth concentrated in a disproportionately small sector of the population.

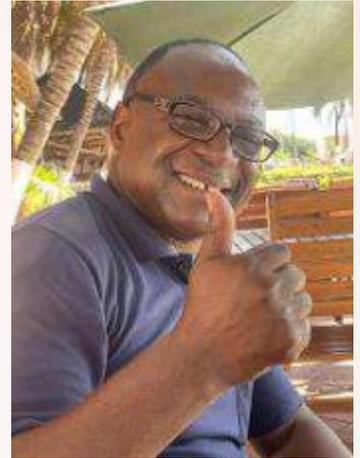


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La Salette Mission in Angola

When the Swiss La Salette missionaries came to Angola 74 years ago, they shared with Angolans the message of reconciliation conveyed by our Lady at La Salette which is first and foremost a gospel message. This message motivated the lives and commitment of these men who came from afar. La Salette has been present in Angola since 1946, (the 100th anniversary of the apparition.) On their arrival, the missionaries did not know the people of the country and they knew nothing of their culture or language. They had to learn the local languages especially Umbundu, the language of the majority of the Angolan population. Reconciliation remains a great challenge for Angola. Even though the 25 years of civil war is over, the country is still deeply scarred and wounded by a past that cannot be very easily forgotten. The war of arms and bombs may be over, but the war of cultural, tribal and ethnic prejudices continue. In the context of that civil war, it was not easy to be a missionary.



I was fortunate to visit some of our missions in Angola in December of 2019 before the pandemic broke out. The former Provincial Superior, Fr. Pedro Chingandu was at the airport to pick me up. I was always accompanied by our missionaries, especially Fr. Pedro Chingandu in the Luanda area, Fr. Avelino Sangameya, the Provincial Vicar in Huambo, Camella, Ndunde, Cubal and Malongo missions and Fr. Celestino Muhatili, the Provincial Superior in Hanha and Benguela missions. It was quite an experience to concelebrate and preach at my first Mass ever in Angola. The church has a covered roof which stands on four pillars. The sacristy was simply at the back of the Church in the



open air where the priests vested and started the procession before the Mass as the congregation sang the entrance hymn. There were hundreds and hundreds of people in attendance. Some people brought their own chairs to sit, others sat on rocks or in the shade of the trees. People spent couple of hours in the scorching heat as it was summer and the temperature climbed up to almost 100 degrees. I was amazed at their participation in the singing and dancing sharing in the joy of the celebration.

Huambo Mission: It was the capital city in colonial times and today is the second most important city after Luanda. 90% of our parishioners are very poor and live on less than one US Dollar a day. Some work on the piece of land they own. They can grow corn, cassava and vegetables. After selling those products, they buy whatever they can afford. Life is a real struggle. This is one of the reasons why the majority of families are unable to pay the school fees for their children. In 2019 there were over 3000 students in a school that was supposed to accommodate ONLY two thousand children. If they do not accept those children, there is a great risk for them



to turn to crime, drug trafficking and/or prostitution. In order to address this threat, our missionaries have embarked on a project to transform an old building into a secondary school building. Only God knows where the help would come from!

Cubal Mission: There are 28 mission stations. Some of them are hundreds of miles away from the center. There is a primary and a secondary school. When on some special Sundays when the church cannot accommodate all the people, mass is celebrated outside in the open air. They usually have at least 2000 baptisms a year. Due to poverty, people look for easy money and end up in drugs and gangs. There are many refugees that remained after the civil war, which creates unemployment and strain on finances. They hope to establish a social center where they can teach and train parishioners especially women in various skills, thus making them bread-winners for the family.



Malongo Mission: There are 18 mission stations, farthest of which is about 60 miles away from Malongo. They have a primary and secondary school with 800 students. How would you teach 800 students with only 4 class rooms? They come in shifts with more than 50 students in one classroom. St. Catherine of Sienna sisters manages two hostels for both boys and girls with 65 students. They are struggling with lack of accommodations and food for the students in their hostels. The priests themselves work on the farm to produce crops that will put some food on the table. Lack of transportation was a common problem everywhere. They have one vehicle and it serves as an ambulance when there is sick call from the parishioners in the middle of the night.

Hanha Mission: Currently, there are 5 La Salette missionaries that serve in this mission. There are 28 remote missions and the farthest is about 100 miles away. There is a primary and secondary school (1-9) with 500 students. They have a soup kitchen that feed the hungry and the poor on Saturdays. On Wednesdays they focus their ministry on the sick and mentally handicapped. Opposed to the Christian beliefs, witchcraft is practiced in the area. The greatest challenge is to maintain the existing structures that are falling apart. They don't have electricity but depend on generators for power. They need more solar panels to have power for at least a few hours at night. They have only one vehicle which limits their travels to interior missions especially during rainy season. In this place, no priests receive a public salary, which makes it difficult even to buy the basics they need. They have to depend on the small donations they receive from their ministry.

Then we drove the longest stretch to Benguela about 10 hours on the road. We made a short visit to our high school seminary with 65 high school seminarians and then proceeded to visit the students in Philosophy. There are 88 philosophy students. The North American La Salette Province had given them a gift upon their request to build a seminary for the philosophers. Upon the completion it can accommodate 100 seminarians with 2 or 3 sharing one room. There are currently 33 theologians and 8 seminarians who are in the novitiate program. The problem in Angola is not lack of vocations. Vocations are plenty but they don't have facilities to accommodate them.

Our missionaries are not only pastors but at times doctors, nurses, non-government representatives, teachers, etc. At times the missionaries shed their blood for their people. One could be blamed and threatened to death as an enemy by either party (Government or rebels). There have also been cases in which a few missionaries (priests, nuns), catechists and other lay people who have been assassinated just because they were Christians. "I have to admit, says Fr. Avelino, the La Salette missionaries gave a wonderful witness to their faith and they saved many lives under mysterious circumstances. I am a La Salette priest today due to their witness. They are my inspiration every day. Honor must be given for their bravery!" Since the civil war ended in April 2002, Angola is on the road to peace and reconciliation. The La Salette missionaries are opening paths of reconciliation by preaching, teaching and living the message day by day. I returned to the USA with such amazement and inspiration seeing the deep faith of Angolan people.



You could continue your support of our Missions by including them in your will.

Should you wish to do so, our legal title is:

North American La Salette Mission Center, Inc.