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An Overview of 75 Years of the Xaverian Brothers in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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On June 15, 1839, Theodore James Ryken, a shoemaker from Holland, founded the Congregation of the Brothers of St. Francis Xavier, more commonly known as the Xaverian Brothers, in Bruges, Belgium. Ryken chose St. Francis Xavier as the patron of the congregation because he envisioned his foundation to be a missionary institute, which would essentially be engaged in the field of education. St. Francis Xavier was the renowned Jesuit missionary who for ten years tirelessly proclaimed the Gospel in India and Japan. He died in 1552 at the age of forty-six on the island of Sancian near the coast of China.

In 1843, Brother Ryken opened our first school, Xaverian Brothers Free Infant School, at the residence of the Brothers in Bruges. The school was for little boys, aged two to six, from poor families in the local area. In those days and until the mid 1960s, the Brothers were not allowed to teach girls. The program called for the gradual teaching of reading, writing, arithmetic and singing. Provision was even made for an afternoon nap.

Brother Ryken sent out his first three missionaries from Belgium to England in 1848. These Brothers began their ministry in the parish of St. Marie in Bury, where they opened a grammar school on May 1, 1848. The school was established by the parish essentially to provide an education for the sons of poor Irish immigrants.

The second missionary endeavor took place six years later in 1854, when Brother Ryken missioned six Brothers to Louisville, Kentucky, in the United States. On August 16, 1854, the Brothers opened two parish grammar schools in



The Brothers gather with Archbishop Floribert Songasonga Mwitwa, Archbishop of Lubumbashi, and Brother John F. Kerr, CFX, former superior general, on the steps of St. Therese Church in Likasi at the conclusion of the Diamond Jubilee Mass on December 1, 2007.



(Left to Right) Brother John F. Kerr, CFX, Brother Philip Revell, CFX (England), Regional Superior and Scholastic Director, Archbishop Floribert Songasonga Mwitwa, Brother Francois Musongo Kafindo, CFX, Headmaster of Institut Tutazamie and General Councillor, Brother Roger Demon, CFX, (Belgium), former teacher and Headmaster of Institut Tutazamie, and former General Councillor, current associate director of postulants and financial manager, Brother Jean de la Croix Kalumba Yena, CFX, perpetual profession in 1989 and current director of the Center of Professional Formation.

Louisville, St. Patrick's and Immaculate Conception. St. Patrick School ministered largely to the sons of Irish immigrants, whereas the students at Immaculate Conception came mostly from the families of German immigrants. Both England and the United States in those years were considered to be missionary territories.

The schools, childcare institutions and other ministries of the Brothers in Belgium, England and the United States grew and flourished through the gift of native vocations in each of these countries. However, despite the fact that Brother Ryken intended the congregation to be missionary in character, there were no further missionary endeavors from 1854 until 1931.

At a general chapter in 1928, in Bruges, Belgium, Brother Paul

Scanlan was the first American Brother to be elected superior general of the congregation. At the conclusion of the general chapter, Brother Paul moved from Baltimore, Maryland, to Bruges, where the Generalate of the congregation was located. Brother Paul's term as superior general may be characterized as the period when a reawakening of missionary spirit took place in the congregation.

About a month after his election, Brother Paul received two letters requesting that Brothers be sent to teach in the Belgian Congo, Africa. One was from Cardinal Willem van Rossum, CSSR, prefect of the Congregation for the Propagation of Faith at the Vatican; the other was from the superior of the Priests of the Sacred Heart in the Congo. In January 1929, the Benedictine Fathers of St Andrew Abbey near Bruges asked Brother Paul for help in the schools and missions they conducted in the Katanga Province of the Belgian Congo, where Monsignor Jean-Felix de Hemptinne, OSB, a monk from that Abbey, was the first bishop. It was probably this Brugian connection that led Brother Paul to explore the possibility of a mission for our Brothers in Katanga Province

In the autumn of 1929, Brother Paul made a visit to the Congo in order to explore the possibility of responding to the request of the Benedictines. On December 3, the feast of St. Francis Xavier, Brother Paul and Monsignor de Hemptinne visited the site of a proposed new church and boys' school in the city of Likasi. In his diary that day, Brother Paul recorded the following, "The site is beautifully situated. I buried a medal of St. Francis Xavier on the spot, where, some day, I hope to see a Xaverian school."

Upon his return to Belgium, Brother Paul sought and received the unanimous approval of the general council for the new foundation in Likasi. One of the general councillors, Brother Isidore Kuppel, provincial in the United States from 1907-1925, resided in the United States. He wrote a letter expressing his approval of the mission, but he also expressed a desire "to see the Mission extended to the Negro boys, later on, when circumstances permit such an extension." This comment needs some

background. At the time of Brother Isidore's letter, the Congo was a colony of Belgium, and the new school in Likasi was being established to educate the sons of the Belgian and other European families living in the Congo. Also, in those days the schools in the Congo were not integrated. The primary school was eventually integrated in 1954, and girls were admitted to the secondary school in 1965. The foresight and wisdom of Brother Isidore's comment is quite remarkable, however, inasmuch as a strong movement for civil rights in the United States did not occur until some thirty-five years later.

Two years after the approval of the project, on August 17, 1931, the first four Belgian Brother missionaries arrived in Likasi, Congo. Sacred Heart Institute, today known as Institut Tutuzamie, opened one month later with an enrollment of sixty students. Thus began the first missionary endeavor in the congregation since the arrival of the Brothers in the United States some seventy-seven years earlier.

Not long after their arrival, the Brother missionaries in the Congo felt they should also devote their energies to the education of African students, and so two years later another notable event occurred. Three new Brothers arrived from Belgium on September 14, 1933, to take responsibility for the direction of two new schools for African Congolese primary students. One school, St. Francis Xavier Primary School, was established in Likasi. The other school, the Kasenga mission school, was located in the middle of the Congolese jungle, some 200 miles from Likasi. Much credit must be given to the Belgian Brothers for their expansion of the ministry of education to Congolese boys just two years after their arrival in the country. We can be sure that Brother Isidore must have been quite pleased "to see the Mission to Negro boys" take place so soon. In 1938 the Brothers expanded their apostolic activities by assuming the direction of a training center for African technicians at the request of the Katangese Railroad Company, a work that would develop into a magnificent technical school for high school students. By 1939 there were fourteen Belgian Brothers working in the Congo. Because of the Brothers' continued interest in missionary work, the number of Belgian Brothers in the Congo increased and reached its peak of thirty-four Brothers from 1956 through 1959.

In 1977 Brother James Clifton (United States) was elected superior general. Brother Jan Devadder (Belgium) and I were elected the two general councillors. At that time the decline in vocations, which began in Europe in the 1950s and in the United States in the late 1960s, was beginning to have its effect in the congregation.

In the spring of 1978, Brother James Clifton and I made our first visit to the Congo (then Zaire). At that time there were in the congregation only two Congolese Brothers, Brother Victor Kazadi Lenge Kipupo and Brother Placide Ngoie Munanga. Both of them had made their perpetual profession, one in 1969, and the other in 1974. During the course of our visit the two Congolese Brothers talked with us



Brother Zacharie Kyungu Kolola, CFX, (right), English teacher, with Brother John F. Kerr, CFX and some students at Institut Tutuzamie.

about their desire and dream of reinstating a formation program in the Congo. We supported their vision and said we would talk to the leadership of the Belgian Province upon our return to Europe. We met that summer with Brother Trudo Sabbe, the then Belgian provincial and former missionary in the Congo, about the proposal. He supported the idea. In 1979 a new formation program was begun under the direction of the two Congolese Brothers.

Brother James Clifton and I made another visit to the Congo in 1981, the 50th anniversary of the foundation there. Brother Jan Devadder wrote a historical survey titled, THE XAVERIAN STORY IN ZAIRE (Congo), to note the anniversary. (I am grateful to Brother Jan for his publication; it is the source of some of the historical data in this article.) There were no official or formal celebrations, however, to mark the jubilee year. At that time the situation for the Congo mission seemed to be quite tenuous and fragile. Because of aging, illness, and other uncontrollable factors, there were about ten Belgian Brothers still in the Congo and there were still only the two Congolese Brothers. In the 1970s, the Brothers had already withdrawn from the two schools they had opened in 1933, namely St. Francis Xavier Primary School in Likasi and the Kasenga mission school. The personnel at the Railroad School was down to a few Brothers.

In 1983 I was elected superior general, and Brother Bernard Philpott (England) was elected vicar general. We made three visits to the Congo during our six-year term of office. It was our desire to provide as much help and support as we could to the Congolese Brothers in their reformation efforts. Our last visit was in December 1988-January 1989. Brother Jean de la Croix Kalumba Yena was to make his perpetual profession in January 1989, and he asked me to come to the Congo to receive his profession. He would be the first Brother in the Congo to take final vows since 1974, and I was

delighted to accept the request. Brother Bernard and I decided to go to the Congo in December in order to celebrate Christmas with our Brothers.

The 75th Jubilee Year of the Brothers in the Congo opened on the feast of St. Francis Xavier, December 3, 2006 and concluded on December 1, 2007. Because the Brothers and the Congolese people have had a special place in my heart since my first visit to the Congo, I had a great desire to be with them for the closing celebration of the jubilee year. I wanted to celebrate with them and to express thanks with them for all that God had done for our Brothers in the Congo over the past twenty-five years. These wishes came true, and I was privileged to visit with our Brothers in the Congo for sixteen days last November-December and to be present for the closing of the jubilee year.

It has been mentioned above that there were only two perpetual professed Congolese Brothers in 1978. Today there



Brother Germain Kabange Mbingwa, CFX, (left), with some of the homeless boys in residence at the Good Shepherd Center.

are eleven perpetual professed Brothers, thirteen temporary professed, four novices and six postulants among our Congolese Brothers. The Brothers have already taken back the administration of St. Francis Xavier Primary School in Likasi. In the summer of 2008, four Brothers will return to Kasenga to teach in our former mission school and to assume responsibility for youth ministry in the diocese. In addition, the Brothers now administer three residences in Likasi for homeless and destitute children, two homes for boys and one for girls. The Brothers provide the thirty-six boys and sixteen girls in these homes with lodging, food and clothing and also send them to local schools for their education. Four expatriate Brothers collaborate in the ministries of the Congolese Brothers: Brothers Roger Demon and Adalbert de Groote from Belgium, Brother Philip Revell from England and Brother Richard Mazza from the United States. I might add that in 2007 Brother Adalbert noted his 55th anniversary as a Xaverian Brother and his 50th anniversary as a missionary in the Congo, while in 2008 Brother Roger Demon celebrates his 60th anniversary as a Xaverian Brother and twenty-five years of ministry in the Congo. Our Congolese Brothers and their American, Belgian and English confreres have come a long way since the 50th anniversary in 1981 and since my last visit in 1989.

There are other significant events concerning our Congolese Brothers that deserve mention. In 1983, Brother Victor Kazadi, senior member of the Congolese Brothers and longtime Headmaster of the Institut Tutazamie, was the first African Brother elected to participate in a general chapter of the congregation. At the general chapter in 2001, Brother Kazadi was the first African Brother to be elected to the general council. Last summer at our general chapter, Brother Francois Musongo Kafindo, current Headmaster at Institut Tutazamie, was elected to the general council. Perhaps most significantly, the Congolese Brothers sent out their first two missionaries in 2006 when Brother Vincent Ilunga Mutombo and Brother Joseph Ngoie wa Nkulu joined American Brother Harold Eccles for ministry in Haiti. What a wonderful Jubilee Year gift that was on the part of our Congolese Brothers to the Haitian people!

It was fitting that the Mass closing the Jubilee Year on December 1 was celebrated in St. Therese Church. Sacred Heart Institute (Institut Tutazamie) and St. Therese Church were opened on the same site in 1931. In 1927 Pope Pius XI had named our patron, St. Francis Xavier, and St. Therese of Lisieux as the patrons of all missions; perhaps reflecting that fact, there has been a long and graced history between the parish and the school over the last seventy-five years. Archbishop Floribert Songasonga Mwitwa, Archbishop of Lubumbashi, was the principal celebrant of the closing Eucharist, along with 10 Congolese concelebrants. In his homily the Archbishop expressed his deep praise of and gratitude to the Xaverian Brothers for their ministry in the archdiocese for the last seventy-five years. The choir of some seventy-five young men



Some of the homeless boys in residence at the Good Shepherd Center.

and women from the Institut Tutazamie was a magnificent addition to the Mass. They were a lively group who sang beautifully and prayerfully with gusto, harmony, gestures, clapping and movement. The liturgy was a joyful and wonderful celebration in true African style.

After the Mass there were snacks and beverages at the school for the students and all the other guests. This was followed by a number of cultural activities on the part of the students. That evening at the residence for the postulants, there was a festive dinner for all the Brothers and a few invited guests, namely, Archbishop Floribert Songasonga Mwitwa, Father Jean Pierre Balela, the chancellor of the diocese, and Father Ferdinand Kalenga, the pastor of St. Therese Church. At the end of the meal two Brothers brought to the table a large and beautifully decorated cake with a number of candles and the inscription "Happy Anniversary." To the tune of "Happy Birthday," the Brothers then sang in English: "Happy Anniversary to us. Happy Anniversary to us. Happy Anniversary dear Brothers. Happy Anniversary to us." It was a blessed, joyful, and fraternal gathering of American, Belgian, Congolese, English and Kenyan Xaverian Brothers, and a fitting closing to the 75th anniversary celebration.

During my visit in the Congo, I mentioned to the Brothers that there was not too much to celebrate on the 50th anniversary in 1981, except for the past. However, there was much to celebrate in this 75th anniversary year: the past, the present and the hope for the future.

Brother Theodore James Ryken, our founder and superior general from 1839-1860, used to encourage and exhort the Brothers with the words "March On! God will provide." On the occasion of this Diamond Jubilee Year in the Congo, our prayer and hope for the Congolese Xaverian Brothers is that they will continue to "March On!" in the faith that "God will provide."



(Left to right) Brother Simone Pierre Mukenge Bakand, CFX, Brother Philip Revell, CFX, scholastic director, Brother Simon de Cyrene Mulowayi Kabeva, CFX, and Brother Vital Mwenge Muganza, CFX in the garden at the Scholasticate.

***About the Author:** Brother John F. Kerr, C.F.X. served as Superior General of the Xaverian Brothers from 1983-89. Previous to that, from 1977-83, he served as Executive Secretary of the General Executive Council, the Congregation's leadership group. Currently, Brother John is retired from active ministry but serves as a spiritual director and adult education instructor. He represented the General Superior at the 75th Anniversary Celebration of Xaverian Brothers in the Democratic Republic of Congo*