Presentation of the Kalongwezi community, Chipata, Zambia

By Jean-Luc Gouiller, 6th November 2014

The Kalongwezi community is on Kanjala Drive in Chipata, the main town of the Eastern Province of Zambia. It is part of the Zambian Sector. Kanjala Drive takes its name from the fourth highest hill around Chipata, on which slopes we are.

The birth of the Kalongwezi Community.

In the Diocese of Chipata, the nineteen nineties were years of trans-mission of quite a few of our parishes, to the diocesan priests especially. In those years it was also thought that the time had come for us to vacate the headquarters of the Diocese, St Anne’s, as it is known.

As a result, starting in 1997, the M.Afr still in the Diocese of Chipata very much felt the need to have a place of their own. In March of that year, at the occasion of an Area Meeting we asked ourselves the following question: A new house/community FOR WHAT PURPOSES? For what “Community Project?

The following answers were formulated:

- To have a place of our own in the Chewa speaking area.
- For missionary witness and animation, and vocation promotion.
- For specialised ministries, e.g. hospital, Islam, on-going formation, archives, learning the local language.
- To have a place and a community from which pastoral care can be given to a compound in Chipata itself.
- To have a foothold and a relay in Chipata, in link with Lusaka and Lilongwe.
- To have a place and a community for resting and individual retreats.
- For practical reasons: e.g. to free the headquarters of the Diocese; to give a chance to some older confreres to have a community of our own and the possibility of a more relaxed timetable, while all the same being able to render precious services.

These answers were discussed and accepted at the following Provincial Council of the then Zambian Province, which in turn made a request to the General Council.

The final choice made was to acquire a place outside any parish institution. An adequate one was found made up of two plots on which there were already some main living quarters and two smaller houses.

Brother Henri Renevey, very much appreciated builder in Chipata Diocese, accepted to do the necessary repairs or transformations of the houses and also to arrange the outside. The other first M.Afr to come to the place were William Russel and Henk van Kessel in the course of 1998. The three of them had been involved in the process of looking for the place and organising it.

Kalongwezi as years went.

A good number of confreres have already stayed in the Kalongwezi community, some giving a hand for a few years only before retirement at home, some, younger or also aged, for a longer time.

Regularly, in the past sixteen years, assessments have been made at the occasion of meetings at whatever levels. Honestly, it appears that all the purposes mentioned as part of the Community Project have indeed been honoured in a way or another.

But adaptation is always needed. For instance in 2010, the question of vocation animation in our Southern Sector of Zambia, which includes Chipata, was rethought for the better.
Then came the creation of the new SAP which showed still more the usefulness to have a community in Chipata, as did the reinforced First Cycle in Balaka and the choice made by Zambia to put again a community at Lumimba, in the neglected Luangwa Valley.

In Chipata Diocese the M.Afr have been left with only two full communities: Lumimba, in the Luangwa Valley and Kalongwezi in Chipata itself. At first after the opening of Kalongwezi, Dave Cullen was alone as M.Afr in the Mphangwe Prayer Centre, near Katete, but he was part of the Kalongwezi Community. In later years he joined the Community.

The community as it has been during the last years:

During the last years, we have most of the time been four or five members in the Kalongwezi community. Henk van Kessel, Dutch, 88 years old, is the unwearied and uncontested Archivist of the Diocese. He has also been the Chicewa/Chinyanja language professor for quite a long time, a job which regularly bounces back.

After the departure of Edgar Pillet in 2012, at 78, for retirement in France, Dave Cullen, English, of the same age, came to replace him as Chaplain of the Regional Hospital nearby, and, like Edgar also, he gives a help to the Marriage Encounter groups. He also does some visits to the local Prison. Both Henk and Dave go to St Monica’s Secondary School for Masses during the week.

Jean-Luc Gouiller, 78, French, who is linked with some groups of the Christian Agricultural and Rural Adult Movement. He has also been asked to update the demarcations and the title deeds of the various places held by the Diocese of Chipata throughout the Province, a work very much tied with the delicate land issue. He also takes part in some vocation work as do the other members of the community.

Joe Mc Menamin, Irish, 74, joined us after several years of missionary animation in Ireland. He replaced Edgar Pillet who was also a curate at the Mary Mother of God Parish of Nabvutika, a big compound of Chipata. After some time Joe became and still is the Parish Priest of that very parish.

The stagiaire Halen Kerketta, from India, is finishing his first year of Stage. He has some activities with the Youth Team of the Diocese and some others in Nabvutika Parish.

Brother René Garand, coming from South Africa, is joining the community and will supervise or follow up the construction work on the site of the new Preformation Centre.

Towards an unexpected new purpose for the Kalongwezi Community.

Indeed out of the blue, at the beginning of 2013, a new decision put the Kalongwezi Community in the limelight. With the growing number of aspirants, the Provincial Council saw the need to have a Preformation Centre for our candidates. A most central place was thought to be Chipata, especially well placed between Zambia Malawi and Mozambique, but also not really far from South Africa.

The existence of the Kalongwezi Community was already an advantage. And indeed the number of visitors increased as a result.

The search for a new place started at the beginning of 2013. After a few months of search and enquiries the choice was made of a new plot near the Lutembwe River on the road going to Malawi, at about two kilometres of the old St Mary’s founded in May 1938 by Mgr Ferdinand Martin, Prefect Apostolic of Fort
Jameson. (However, that property was sold away some twenty five years later, because it was not central enough for the existing Catholic communities of the time and money was needed for a new parish).

If you pass by Chipata.

Here is the way to find us at Kalongwezi:

- **Coming from Lusaka**, on the Great East Road, enter the town, until you have the Post Office on your left. You arrive at the only traffic lights in Chipata. Turn right, you are on the Provincial Hospital road. Go up until the end of the tarmac, turn left, then the first road on the right is the Kanjala Drive. We are on the fifth residence after a long wall of neighbours below us. Most welcome to plots 289 and 288.

- **Coming from Malawi**, pass the new plot, the Lutembwe River, the Mchini and the Shoprite areas and arrive at the traffic lights (don’t worry if them don’t work!), turn left, etc.

Chipata.

The name of *Chi-pata* would mean the **big gate** or **big passage/corridor**. And it is indeed true geographically. A look on a map shows it and we realise it if we stop to look around as we come in from any side. It has also been a place of convergence for various ethnic groups and even religions. Chipata is very much the hub of the Eastern Province, a Province eminently active agriculturally, and very fast growing in many aspects.

We, the **adopted residents** of Chipata, believe that, scenery-wise, Chipata may be the most beautiful spot of all the towns of Zambia! The hills around are simply gorgeous. The top of our neighbouring hill, the Kanjala, at 1400 metres, provides a most beautiful panorama, which may make us remember the words of Cardinal Lavigerie: *Love the people to whom you are sent...I have loved everything about our Africa: its past, its future, its mountains, its clear sky, its sun...*

Regrettably, such a panorama also shows the necessity to care for that beautiful place. Environmental concern and the care for creation still have to grow. We may also play our part in it.