

# PASSION FOR GOD AND COMMITMENT TO HUMANITY

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## *A young person in an unstable country*

Scarcely had my country, the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), attained its independence (1960) when it experienced several rebellions (Katangaise, Muleliste, etc...) which have marked the majority of my people. I was born the 13<sup>th</sup> of October, 1960, four months after Independence. I have known since childhood the regime of civil wars followed by the military dictatorship of President Mobutu. A large part of my life was under this rule which for 32 years (1965-1997) governed the country with an iron hand. Until 1991 no opposition, neither military nor civil, could upset this system. Scarcely had I begun University (1981), when Mobutu decided to close the Universities to send the students into forced military service. I was among those who resisted being enlisted. I joined those at the time who were denouncing this political regime. The fighting was severe and disproportionate. On one side was a group of civilians without resources up against a super-military power with merciless secret police.

The following year, no longer able to study in an official University, I began my university formation at the Catholic Faculty of Kinshasa. At the end of my first cycle, I joined the Company of Jesus.

*Passion for God*

Marked by the horrors of the dictatorship, I lived with the constant preoccupation: “What to do for myself and my people to get out of this marginalization.”

Several solicitations were filed against the regime of Mobutu (1). But in reality the situation only worsened. Thus, I entered the novitiate with the conviction that one day things had to change. I asked myself if the choice that I had to make, “Passion for God” was the best way to be “committed to people” and in solidarity with my people.

To my great satisfaction I discovered among other things, at the beginning of my formation, the topic of the 4<sup>th</sup> Decree of the Thirty-second General Congregation. The study of this section was a key moment in my journey and the catalyst unifying my two aspirations. It provided me with a solid argument for a commitment to the two poles of Ignatian spirituality which I would strive, henceforth, to uphold.

At the end of my Theological Studies, 1992, I felt the need to incarnate these studies into concrete actions. With some friends, we began to create a *NGO with Christian values for the defense of human rights and for civic education named “Jeremy Group”*<sup>2</sup>, which to oppose the dictatorship, would operate openly and would use the active and evangelical non-violent method (consciousness-raising, petitions, sit-ins, marches, etc....)

This period was the most fruitful of our commitment to democracy and good governance. The regime of Mobutu had weakened; more than one observer had already announced the end of the dictatorship.

In 1994, all local efforts had to be cancelled because of the war and the genocide in the neighbouring country of Rwanda.

*The crisis in the Region of the African Great Lakes*

On April 6, 1994, the airplane of the Rwandan President was shot down in Kigali. War then followed and a stream of more than 2 million Rwandan refugees poured into Congo territory.

As leader of the civil society in the frontier town of Bukavu (Eastern part of RDC) I found myself at the centre of this human drama. The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) came to our help by opening the first project of which I was in charge. But our efforts to stabilize the situation were limited. Actually, the town of Bukavu was comprised of 250,000 inhabitants. It received in 15 days over 350,000 refugees. This phenomenon created incredible congestion for all public services. The whole social fabric was blocked. It was at this very moment that I experienced the limitations of working in a crisis situation rather than on its cause. I would spend my days organizing the refugee camps, distributing food, struggling to control epidemics, gathering together the orphans and caring for the wounded. And each day the work became more difficult than the previous day...the needs were enormous and the human and financial means so very limited.

This crisis was a challenge for our faith. How can one even imagine, let alone justify such things happening in a country whose majority were Christians! This situation reduced our charity to insignificance as our conscience became ever more profoundly affected.

It was after this painful experience of the limitations of generosity and of good faith that my province offered me the opportunity to get some formation in political sciences at the "Padre Arrupe" Institute of Policy Formation, Palermo, Italy.

In 1995, when I left Bukavu the situation was desperate. The genocide had brought the total to more than 500,000 dead in Rwanda; Burundi was in civil war. Zaire (now known as the Democratic Republic of Congo, RDC) became destabilized by the presence on its territory of more than 2,000,000 Rwandan refugees. Like a hurricane the genocide had mowed down human lives, all of whom were so dear to me. Bishop Christophe Munzihirwa SJ was assassinated on October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1996 in the aftermath of the crisis, this time in RDC.

As I was questioning within myself this chaotic situation I began to reflect more systematically and methodically on what could contribute towards a return to peace, stability, good governance and progress in my country and its neighbours to the south.

As the region is more than 90% Christian, I dedicated the first year of my research to the study of the Church's teaching on socio-political commitment.<sup>3</sup>

Having discovered that the Christian Faith was, despite everything, a powerful lever when it comes to working for a better world, I dedicated the second year of my research to exploring what could become the mission of the Church in Africa and particularly in RDC. I elaborated upon several action steps, that I have not yet finished exploring, that could be put into practice.

In 1997, I returned to my country, better prepared to face and contribute something to the multipolar crisis that had spread throughout the southern region of the Great Lakes. Then a second war broke out in August of 1998. By October 1998 with others we created the *Network of organizations with Christian aspirations for the defense of human rights and public education*. (RODHECIC Réseau d'organisations d'inspirations chrétiennes de défense des droits de l'homme et d'éducation civique).<sup>4</sup> It comprises today about 75 member and 102 partner organizations working over the 2,345,000 km<sup>2</sup> of RDC. The objective was to create among the committed organizations a synergic faith-community for the transformation of society. While working in close collaboration with the Centre for Study for Social Action (CEPAS Centre d'Etude pour l'Action Sociale) I was called in 2003 to animate its socio-political dimension.

### ***My joys and sorrows, the Kisangani Massacres***

In this work I knew moments of joy and discouragement. Actually, from the 14th or 15th of May, 2002, the city of Kisangani underwent the most horrible massacres in the history of our country. A death squadron

arrived in this city which proceeded to massacre civilian populations, to execute the military and then mutilate their bodies. The decapitated and disemboweled bodies stuffed into bloody sacs were then thrown into the river by this commando from the height of the Tshopo bridge.

Thanks to the network of organizations and personnel on the spot and to the satellite telephone that I was able to use, I have become the main contact for the cries of despair of the martyrs of Kisangani. By keeping myself out of range of the executioners, I can alert national and international opinion in minutes after an outbreak of killings. Hour after hour, I publish several on-the-spot reports and press releases denouncing this situation, indicating names of the chief executioners and providing identities of victims. This action has resulted in stopping on time massacre which in less than 48 hours have already brought about some 250 deaths among the civilian population. It was possible for the first time to retrace from where the squadron had come, to know their number and the names of their squadron leaders.

As a follow-up to this information, the United Nations sent two high-ranking Missions of Inquiry which asked that the silent partners of this killing be arrested and brought before the court of justice. But up until now these persons have never been searched. On the contrary, some are, thanks to the peace, functioning today in responsible positions. Certain ones have more than once tried to harm eye-witnesses whom we helped escape and ourselves as well. Two Jesuits (Fathers Xavier Zabalo and Guy Berhaegen) heading for Kisangani, were ill-treated during these outbreaks.

***Conclusion.***

*Today, with the setting up of the Government for National Unity and the perspective of free elections our work has been*

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*developing along two lines:*

~ the preparation of the people to appropriate the future by a responsible and an enlightened electoral choice,

~ the formation of a political and social leadership within the religious confessions.

Certainly, the situation remains difficult, but our passion for God and our commitment to our people is a fire that no one will ever be able to extinguish.

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<sup>1</sup> Read: "The call to redress the wrongs of the nation", a declaration of the Bishops of Zaire, 1 July, 1978, "Our faith in mankind, image of God", a declaration of the permanent committee of the Bishops of Zaire, 2 July, 1981

<sup>2</sup> [www.groupe-jeremie.org](http://www.groupe-jeremie.org)

<sup>3</sup> Rigobert Minani, *Existe-t-il une doctrine socio-politique de l'Eglise?* Kinshasa, Cepas, 200, 208 pages

<sup>4</sup> [www.rodhecic.org](http://www.rodhecic.org)