

## **A Witness to Peace and Justice in Congo**

### **John SSF**

Familiar words from the Principles of the First Order concluded Morning Prayer in Hilfield chapel one day last autumn: "The community does not expect ever to have at its disposal many funds for the administration of charitable relief, but it will gladly lend its members in the work of such relief and co-operate with others who are doing it."

Originally drawn to Franciscan community partly by "the call of the poor", to quote Jean Vanier, I spent our half-hour of silent prayer badgering God about how this could be expressed from a Dorset hamlet. That same morning an email arrived appealing for volunteer observers to participate in the first democratic elections for 40 years in Congo (ex-Zaire). Six months later in April, with approval from the community and funding from friends, I was on a plane bound for Kinshasa. Outlook Express had lived up to its name.

Emerging from the maelstrom of Ndjili airport, I was ferried across town on potholed roads past teeming crowds, sprawling shanty-towns and bullet-pocked buildings full of squatters. Marauding militias in the anarchic and mineral-rich eastern provinces have caused Kinshasa's population to soar to up to ten million. Vacant patches of land have been transformed into kitchen gardens in an effort to stave off hunger. Twelve hundred Congolese die each day from the repercussions of violence and malnutrition.

Sharing in an Urgent Peace Project co-ordinated by the Mennonites, I helped to train national volunteers to act as observers at the presidential and legislative elections, postponed until 30 July. Enthusiasm at registering a vote was tempered by scepticism about the ruling cabal's ability or willingness to share power or indeed to use it at all to benefit anyone but themselves. Congo is entering democracy without democrats. Most will vote out of tribal loyalty.

Opportunities arose to visit church projects targeting some of the social problems resulting from the breakdown of the famed extended African family, under immense strain from war, disease and extreme poverty. Craftsmen are being helped to market their wood-carvings locally and in North America. The school fees of AIDS orphans are paid to relieve the burden on relatives who have taken them in despite their own lack of resources. This prevents them from swelling the ranks of Kinshasa's 30,000 abandoned street children, often falsely accused of witchcraft and vulnerable to abuse from flourishing so-called deliverance ministries. Sitting with these families in a squalid neighbourhood where few whites ever ventured, I struggled to find words of consolation and encouragement to be translated into Lingala. These were the most haunting pastoral visits of my life, because of the mixture of gentleness and desperation with which I was welcomed.

At a meeting monitoring the political shenanigans of the electoral process I met Madame Georgette, and invited myself to the orphanage she told me she ran. Beginning five years ago on a plot near the university begrudgingly donated by her father, she provides food, clothing and shelter for an ever-increasing band of children, currently numbering fifty-four. Assisted only by Clement, who lives in the boys' house and, when she can pay, by two teachers, Georgette haphazardly receives sacks of maize flour from the World Food Programme and grows manioc on the hillside. Having grown up in Los Angeles, she has chosen to return to her homeland to devote whatever she can earn from lecturing and occasional consultancy work in economics and development to this all-consuming project. Her

dream is to found a school and clinic for these and other local children. Once they realized whatever was hers was theirs, the children ceased to steal and now share in all the decision-making. Never more than in their company have I sensed the truth of Christ's words: "The Kingdom of God is among you."

The Anglicans are relatively recent arrivals in Kinshasa, having been first established around the Great Lakes. They invited me to preach. The vibrancy and joyful faith of these people who continue to suffer much left a lasting impression. The diocese is run on a shoestring from the bishop's living room while office foundations take shape in his yard.

Thanks to my intrepid African hosts, we managed to track down the Order of Friars Minor at their study house and were welcomed as brothers by the friars there. An unexpected outcome of my journey was that I became a catalyst for new alliances between Congolese Christians of various denominations in their joint search for peace and justice. For them all, contact with Western believers is proof that they are not forgotten or abandoned, and maintains the hope that their struggles may be aided by our advocacy, almsgiving and intercession. Personally, I have discovered a new context in which to respond to "the call of the poor" by loving mercy, acting justly and walking humbly with my God. **f**



*Picture: John (far right) looks on as some of the children in the orphanage move out of the formal photo line-up and into play time.*