

Fr. Edmond Bamtupe Kisughu, 53; Fr. Anselme Kakule Wasukundi, 41; Fr. Jean-Pierre Mumbere Ndulani, 50

Witnesses, the three religious of the parish of Notre-Dame-des-Pauvres, in Mbau, in the northeast region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Since their kidnapping on October 19, 2012 their parishioners, colleagues, and the entire Church have mobilized to respond.



Night had fallen in Mbau, a small town located on the frontier between the savannah and the forest in the northeast region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). In the Assumptionist community, Friday, October 19, three priests, Anselme, Joseph and Jean-Pierre – were sitting around and making small talk in the living room. As a result of the climate of violence which had spread throughout the area in recent months (assaults, murders, kidnappings), the three priests of Notre Dame des Pauvres Parish were wondering how to do their rounds in the various mission outstations tin order to pray for the dead on November 2, the feast of All Souls. They were also talking about the construction of a parish hall which had been dragging on for five years. Edmond, a fourth priest, was out of the balcony taking care of his

laundry. Anselme and Jean-Pierre decided to turn off the electric generator and continue their conversation while

Joseph went off to his room where he locked his doors and closed his shades. Suddenly he heard the sound of voices nearby. Someone tried to enter his room. The lock held. He heard Jean-Pierre

repeat: «We don't have any money here ; we don't have any money here!» Then, silence. It was 9:30 PM. Joseph tried to leave but the door had jammed in the meantime… At 5:40 AM he was finally able to get out of his room. The house was empty, the outside doors wide open. The abductors had taken the three priests and nothing else.

The Augustinians of the Assumption built the church of Notre-Dame-des-Pauvres, in Mbau, in 1952. Since then they have served in this fertile land, where beans, peanuts, and coffee grow. In Mbau, they oversee a secondary school, l'Institut Moéra, the biggest in the area, which serves 450 boys and girls. They also run a large farm that employs a hundred workers and produces palm oil, the proceeds of which help run the province. Next to the parish 8 nuns, Little Sisters of the Presentation, run the hospital of Mbau. Here as elsewhere in this huge country with extraordinary resources, plagued by violence and corruption, the Church exists as the only institution that works. In the diocese of Butembo-Beni – where the first bishop was an Assumptionist in 1934 – the congregation, founded by Emmanuel d'Alzon, has some 13 communities. …in Beni, a small town with a little industry and a small airport, in Oicha, in Mbau, in Butembo, an important commercial center where the provincial house is located, and elsewhere. The gold mines of Ituri, a little to the north and the copper and coltan mines in North Kivu Province, just to the south, all near the borders of South Sudan, Uganda, and Rwanda, have led all kinds of greed and uncontrolled exploitation and trafficking . For the last 15 years a number of militias, the Congolese national army, and armies from neighboring countries have waged endless war.

Last February Fr. Jean-Marie Mwamba, the pastor in Mbau from 1996 to 1998, made a whirlwind tour of the communities in the diocese. He took care to travel by day on the road from Butembo to Beni, then on the paved road between Mbua and Oïcha. At night anything can happen. In Mbau, he was welcomed by Edmond Kisughu, the eldest of the three priests taken captive, who had just returned from teaching his French class at the Institut Moéra. Besides giving class, this devoted teacher, 53 years old, who is rather taciturn, spends the bulk of his time serving parishioners in the outstations of the parish. Ordained in 1986, he belongs to the first generation of Congolese Assumptionists. Around the table, the conversation turned naturally to the topic of security. The brothers know this land better than anyone. Every month

they get reports from catechists who live in the remotest corners of the parish. The last ones they had received spoke of the climate of terror sown by the rebels of the ADF-Nalu (Alliance of Democratic Forces/National Liberation Army of Uganda), a guerilla group that had ravaged the northern part of Uganda before being ousted from there……looting, rape, kidnapping. The Assumptionists launched a local radio station in Oicha, Radio Moto («fire» in Swahili), which broadcasts news of any abuses whether from the army of the Lord's Resistance, a Ugandan group of unimaginable cruelty, from the Mau-Mau, a sort of self-defense militia, Congolese rebels of the «M23» movement, or simply bands of outlaws or deserters. These small, uncontrollable groups make alliances among themselves and fight against each other. They have but one common enemy --- a Congolese army composed in large part from former rebels who also make the local population suffer. The bishop of the diocese of Butembo-Beni, Most Rev. Sikuli Melchisedec, is the first decry publicly this state of permanent insecurity. Every year he tours all the parishes around Beni to administer the sacrament of Confirmation. It is an opportunity for him personally to denounce the violence and the impunity whose victims are first and foremost simple farmers in the area. In the eastern part of the Congo the Church is the voice of the voiceless. That is why it enjoys such great respect.

Since Fr. Jean-Marie Mwamba left North Kivu, the situation has gotten even worse. In August, a close friend of Fr. Edmond, Faustin Wavirire, dean of studies at the Institut Moéra, father of six children, was assassinated at home at 3 AM by unknown individuals dressed in uniforms. In Butembo, on the morning of September 26, soldiers from the Congolese army climbed over the fence of the chancery and beat up all the priests and lay workers who were there. They claimed that they had come to requisition a truck belonging to the diocese! In the end they left with money and cell phones.

In the meantime the pastoral team at Notre-Dame-des-Pauvres Parish has been renewed. Edmond is the only «holdover». He was joined by Fr. Jean-Pierre Ndulani, 50 years old, ordained a priest in 1994, recently returned from Ireland where he had earned a Master's degree in Management. Before that, he had lent a hand in the establishment of the Institut supérieur Emmanuel-d'Alzon of Butembo (Emmanuel d'Alzon Institute of Higher Education), a center of formation open to all. Passionate about questions of development, this soccer player --- he has a reputation for being an outstanding goalie ---- helped in the foundation of the Assumptionist community in Riobamba (Ecuador). Anselme Kakule Wasukundi, 41 years old, is the youngest of those taken captive. Ordained in 2004, he had just received a Master's degree in history in Butembo, where he had been teaching until he arrived in Mbau. Several months earlier, Fr. Joseph Paluku, 45 years old (the only one who escaped apprehension), had also come from Butembo. His specialty is in catechesis which allowed him to begin planning a widespread program of formation in the parish. All four are natives of the province of North Kivu.

Saturday, at dawn, Fr. Joseph went to inform the local police who came to investigate what had

happened. This latest kidnapping has sown confusion and consternation. Fr. Protais Kabila, Provincial of the Province of Africa, accompanied by the provincial treasurer, hurried to Mbau as soon as possible to be at Fr. Joseph's side. The next day, Sunday, he presided at Mass at Notre-Dame-des-Pauvres, during which he entreated the faithful to cooperate to the fullest in the investigation. At the cathedral in Butembo, the bishop invited everyone to "pray that God might touch the hearts of the kidnappers." Monday morning Radio Moto began broadcasting news of the event and appealing for assistance. Officially, the army and the police have been mobilized to deal with the matter but the Church knows that it cannot rely on these networks. The general house of the Assumptionists in Rome remains on alert. On Wednesday, October 24, in Mbau, the Provincial and the Assumptionists planned a prayer march to the territorial administrator's office in Oïcha and to that of Monusco (Mission des Nations unies pour la stabilisation du Congo/United Nations Mission for the Stabilisation of the Congo), whose 20,000 men are supposed to guarantee the security of the local population. «They're supposing to be fostering hope among the people," Joseph said to the Provincial. In spite of its considerable resources, the Monusco soldiers claim that they are unable to carry out their mission, a claim that has ignited anger and discouragement. Two days later, the march had to be canceled because of because from the authorities.

There remains the hope expressed by Fr. Joseph that "the kidnappers too our brothers because they need something and hopefully they will do them no harm. We are exhausted, even if our hopes remain high. Our brothers belong to the universal Church. May Christians throughout the world raise their voices of our brothers' behalf. Perhaps your voices are more powerful than ours. And please remain united with us in prayer."

Le Pèlerin, November 1, 2012, by SAMUEL LIEVEN and PHILIPPE DEMENET