

PROMINENT ASSUMPTIONIST Charles Mbogha Kambale (1942-2005)

A native of the diocese of Butembo-Beni (North Kivu Province, Democratic Republic of the Congo), Most Rev. Charles Mbogha Kambale was born in 1942 in Kilubo, the son of Emile Malyabwana and Cécile Kahambu. He attended high school at St. Joseph's diocesan minor seminary in Musienene (1956-1963), and pursued his philosphy and theology studies at Pius X major seminary in Bukavu, the major metropolitan area of the province (1963-1965, 1965-1969). Ordained a priest on July 24, 1969, he was first of all appointed professor at the minor seminary he had attended in Musienene (1969-1970), and then professor at the Collège Lwanzururu in Beni (1970-1972). It was at this time that he officially asked to join the Assumptionists and began his novitiate under the able direction of the only other Congolese Assumptionist at the time, Fr. Jérôme Masumbuko Tsongo Ndara. Once professed, he left for Brussels, Belgium to pursue a licentiate in catechetics at the Lumen Vitae Institute.

Before Fr. Charles' definitive commitment with the Assumptionists, his bishop, Most Rev. Emmanuel Kataliko, the second bishop of the diocese and the first Congolese, expressed his approval in these words:

''It seems that Fr. Charles Mbogha is about to pronounce his final vows. Excellent: he is a good priest, dynamic, pious, devout, and always ready to serve. It is certain that if he continues on this path he will attract a lot of vocation to religious life, something we encourage" (February 19, 1978). So it was that on March 29 of the same year Fr. Charles was received into the Assumptionists for life.

Among the appointments he received in the Congregation, several could be cited: parish ministry in Butembo, professor at the Collège Pie X, later baptized Institut Kambali, where he was head-master from 1977 to 1984, member of the Provincial Council, and participant in the regional ecumenical commission. In 1984 he was named rector and superior of the Assumptionist house of philosophy in Butembo and afterward superior of the house of theology in Kinshasa and professor of theology at Mazenod major seminary.

During all these years Fr. Charles' outstanding qualities had become widely appreciated --- his leadership ability, his hard work, his spiritual and intellectual depth, his pastoral sensitivity, and his winning personality. It was no surprise that he was named bishop, in 1990, of the diocese of Wamba, in the northeast corner of the Congo and after five years appointed bishop of the neighboring diocese of Isiro-Niangara where he stayed until 2001. In the year 2001 after the sudden death of his beloved mentor, Bishop Kataliko, who had become archbishop of Bukavu, Fr. Charles was himself asked to become his successor.

As a pastor, Bishop Charles chose a rather revealing motto taken from I Cor 9:22, "I became all things to all men". It was a motto that he would faithfully honor --- drawing close to all the faithful in spite of social status, ethnic background, language or religion. He was beloved by all, a shepherd who greatly encouraged the base community movement, enjoyed the respect of local civil authorities, and maintained close ties with the leaders of other religious confessions.

Being a man of communion in a hotspot like the Great Lakes Region of Africa left the archbishop vulnerable to being targeted by any number of militias, foreign and domestic, that, since the outbreak of hostilities in 1997, had left the Congo in turmoil. The region of Bukavu had witnessed pillaging, rape, kidnapping, and the outright occupation of some territory by these forces. Several of his own priests were abducted and he himself was threatened on numerous occasions, not unlike his predecessors, one of whom, Munzihirwa Christophe, SJ, was savagely assassinated in 1996 and another of whom, his friend, Emmanuel Kataliko, was hounded to the point that some consider that his heart attack was brought about by the endless harassment he experienced. During these years, the eastern Congo suffered the loss of some 2 million people and none of these three could remain silent in the face of such atrocities. The militia had little patience for someone who denounced their actions and publicly called for them to cease and desist.

What made matters worse for Bishop Charles, not even 60 years old at the time of his appointment in Bukavu, was his status at the bishops' conference of the Congo where he

became a public voice for the victims of the violence and aggression of the militia. In spite of his weak health (he had suffered from a series of stroke-like episodes), Bishop Charles refused to capitulate to the harassment he himself experienced but the toll became more and more evident as his health deteriorated and eventually incapacitated him. He died in 2005, mourned by thousands of "little people" who found in him a courageous pastor true to his motto to the end, "I became all things to all men".