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LETTERS FROM AN APOSTLE: THE INNER LIFE OF FATHER COSMAS OF ZAIRE

The following extracts of letters of Fr. Cosmas (Aslanidis) of Grigoriou Monastery, Mt. Athos, from 1979 to 1986, were written to friends, co-workers, and monastic brethren from his mission in Kolwezi, Zaire (now the Republic of the Congo). The letters are small spotlights on the life of this missionary-monk, whose work in Africa is reaping a rich harvest fifteen years after his repose.

February 8, 1981

...Today we, my father, Mr. Costas Phillipou, some children and myself, visited a village by the name of Kabounzi. The village is found on the border of Zambia (in the area where the rebels operate). We traveled through pools of water and mud on a very bad road. Fortunately, God blessed us and sent us a new car suitable for the forest.

The people rejoiced that we had come to visit them. A priest together with a small choir arrived the day before from another village, so we were able to do Matins inside a thatched-hut church. The Christians, covered with a few shabby pieces of clothing, chanted and sang to the Highest in an Orthodox

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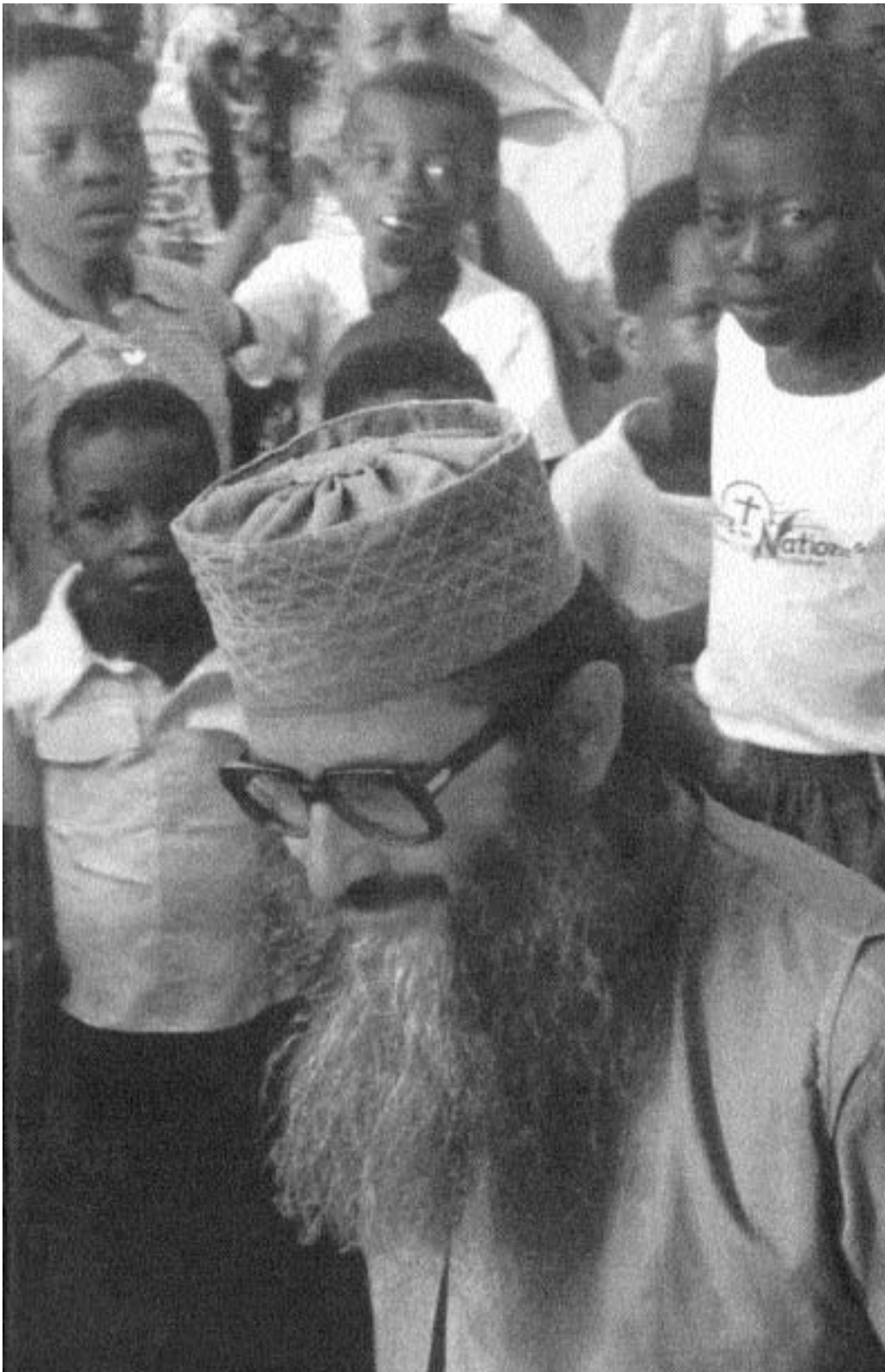


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way. During Divine Liturgy I spoke to them a little about witchcraft, with which they are sorely pressed in this idol-worshipping area, as well as about polygamy, for within the congregation was the ruler of the area with five wives and the leader of the village with two or three wives. Afterwards, the leaders, along with my father and Costas, sat on the stools and began to sing all together, while the women danced modestly in front of them.

I left them some medicine, for different epidemics that plague them, and the native priest remained with them to continue their instruction.

...With regard to the evil and disorder that Satan directed toward the Monastery...I have provided a room in the belfry of our church to a demon-possessed woman to stay year-around. She eats, walks, and is generally all right. Occasionally, she starts dancing and singing endlessly, but is otherwise fine. She is advanced in age, unbaptized, of course, and an idol-worshipper. She has nine grown children, but can't live with anyone. With us she calms down. When, however, we have baptisms or *agiasmo* (the blessing of the waters), the exact moment that I am blessing the water, even though she is far away, the demon begins to drive her crazy. I have observed this on four different occasions. On two occasions she jumped into the baptismal font. When I asked her why she had done this, she replied that she wants to cast Satan out of her. As this happened right at the time of the sanctification of the waters, both the catechumens and the faithful observed it. So, I preached to them a timely sermon on how the manifest reaction of Satan is proof that the water is sanctified by the Grace of the Holy Spirit. Thus, they are able to use the *agiasmo* with great assurance for the dispelling of the various kinds of witchcraft that are performed against them.

Kinshawa.
June 27, 1983

...You tell me that you are drowning in your work, but come here and you'll see what it means to work.

Of course, the results of our work here will be evident only after quite a few years. For the time being, we can only expend and offer our strength as a sacrifice at the altar of the Mission. In order for a church to be secure it requires

many sacrifices from saints, who, with their lives, examples, and even martyric blood, will establish the Church of God in this place, which is now literally ruled by the devil. Until the Lord of the Vineyard sends His worthy laborers, we will stir His forbearance and labor with our weak abilities and passions. Pray only that we not scandalize. We have no talents to offer. The only positive thing is that whatever we do have we give out of love for Christ without holding back anything. Father Paisios tells me: "Continue on, however, the struggle will be a long one, for the people there will be slow in coming to accept Christianity, etc." And his judgements, without him having lived them, I see now, and they are true.

Our efforts are blessed. Catechizing continues in all our parishes. Young native Africans are approaching the Church, but we are a little reserved as to baptizing them. We want them first to be tested well, and this is because we are devoid of staff and good co-workers so as to establish them as baptized Christians in their parishes. With the help of God, in the years to come we hope to be able to take co-workers from among the sixty or so young people we now have in the mission house.

We are battling in Kolwezi to form a small community of faithful Christians with a sacramental life and regular divine services, etc. There are signs of progress. Where we are making no progress is with the parishes at a distance of 300 to 700 kilometers. Our farm provides us with vegetables and other suitable foods (even meat and eggs) for use at the mission house. May God have the glory! It is more than enough for us, so we are able to help out a leper colony, the prisons of the city and quite a few of the poor and sick. The tractor, with which we plough an area of 160 *stremmata* for the cultivation of corn, has helped us in these philanthropic efforts. We are now in the process of making a corn mill to grind the corn, which will take care of a portion of the year's flour.

Over the past few months I have been forced to do all of the confessions on my own. In this I have lived intensely the drama of our fellow men. A



Grigoriou Monastery, Mt. Athos.

PHOTO COURTESY UNCUT MOUNTAIN PRESS

large number of the natives here eat but once every two or three days. How they manage to survive is a miracle. They are truly sparrows fed by God.

I am writing you from the capital city of the country. Health-wise I wrestle sometimes with malaria and other times with head pains, on account of sunstroke, etc. “Glory to God for all things.”

Saturday, June 1, 1985
Pentecost

...On this day, from daybreak until midnight we preformed the baptisms of one hundred catechumens and the weddings of ten Christian couples...In the evening, the women kept “vigil” in order to prepare tomorrow’s table with food and a pig that we brought them. There in the courtyard of the church six Christians from the village of Bade also spent the night. These are the first leaven of Christians from their village...

The first spots in Likasi’s Church of the Three Hierarchs were filled from beforehand by the newly wedded and further back the newly illumined. They followed the Divine Service with great devotion and partook of the Body and Blood of our Lord for the first time. The “brightness in their faces” at such moments is beyond description, but is a reality which we live and from which we receive strength in order to surmount the array of daily difficulties.

At midday old and new Christians ate together sitting on the ground. They ate with their hands, without settings, but with simplicity of heart, much joy and the Grace of the Holy Spirit. The Pentecost in the Upper Room of the Disciples of our Lord, for the one hundred newly illumined and for us who took part in this celebration, continues today just as it did then. In the afternoon, Vespers with the Kneeling Prayers took place, with the van taking the twenty-five newly illumined to their village a little later on.

Monday, June 3
Feast of the Holy Spirit

...Late in the evening we arrive in Kolwezi. Here I found Christopher, one poor Christian, carrying his dead five-year-old son on his back in order to go to his village, which lies ten kilometers outside of Kolwezi. In the span of two weeks this man lost five children from an epidemic. I took him, his son and his wife in the car to the Mission Base. We put the poor little child in a coffin, covered him with a white sheet and, together with Father Gerasimos, took them to their village in order to bury him. Outside of their hut both Christians and idol-worshippers were waiting for them. The latter group started to mourn in their usual way, bent over and rolling on the ground, belting out inarticulate cries. We calmed them down and read the Service and spoke to them about death and the Resurrection. Father Gerasimos remained with many of the Christians in order to pass the night with chanting and prayer...

October 20, 1986

...these days I see that the evil one is trying hard to destroy us: serious damage to the automobiles, friends suddenly become the worst enemies, worries and anxiety from our co-workers, many times without justification, etc.

So it is that I withdrew to my hermitage and placed myself on a strict fast, as many days as I can withstand, purification of heart with continuous study of the appropriate books of the *nipitic* fathers...in any case one thought that I have is that, if I don't have internal indication of illumination and the prayer in my heart, I shouldn't go ahead with the evangelization of the people.

June 17, 1979

Geronda... I'm following your advice so as to have your blessing and as soon as I feel a little dryness, I abandon everything and, together, with the boys, do the prayer rope. It's serious medicine and our only consolation in the monotonous jungle. Every day I remember the answers of Father Auxentius who, to whatever they would ask him, would answer: "The prayer, say the prayer." How right he was!

What's important is to be true and total, without holding back, with a disposition of self-sacrifice and self-denial, and with the aim of leaving our bones among the natives. ✦

Readers who would like to read further about this fascinating contemporary missionary will find the biography (co-authored by his father) an impressive and inspiring work: *Apostle to Zaire: The Life and Legacy of Blessed Father Cosmas of Grigoriou*, by Demetrios Aslanidis and Monk Damascene Grigoriatis, Uncut Mountain Press, Thessalonica, Greece, 2001, \$15.00 per copy. Distributed by: St. Anthony's Monastery, Florence, Arizona, 85232-3188, e-mail www.saintanthonymonastery.com