



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

# ROAD TO EMMAUS

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# WE ARE GOING TO LIVE IN PARADISE: ORTHODOXY IN THE CONGO

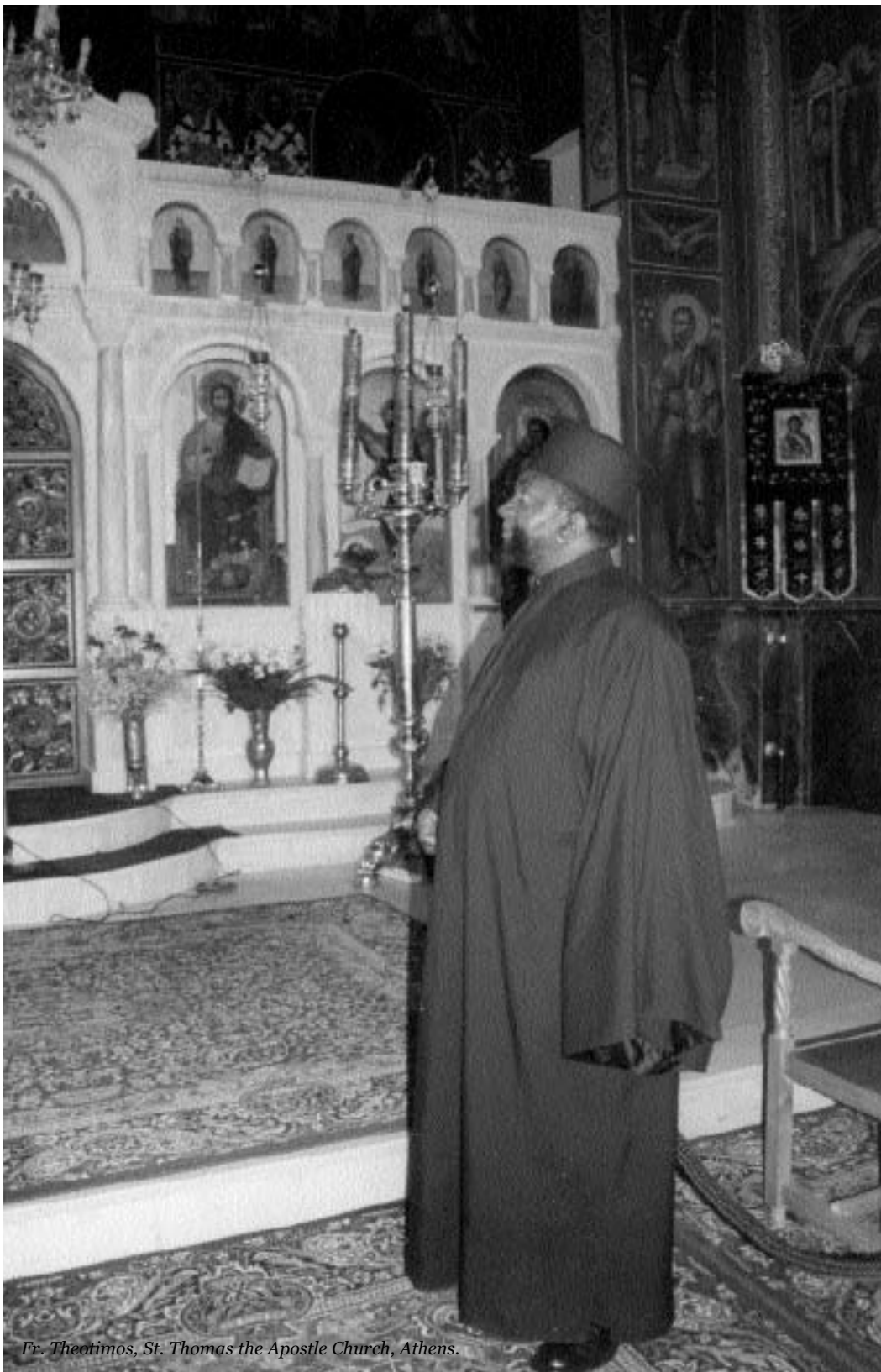
In Greece, *Road to Emmaus* staff interviewed Fr. Theotimos Tsalas, a Congolese Orthodox priest and spiritual son of Fr. Cosmas Aslanidis of Grigoriou Monastery, the “Apostle to Zaire.” Now serving at St. Thomas the Apostle Orthodox Church in Athens, Fr. Theotimos draws a vivid picture of sub-Saharan spirituality and the growth of Orthodoxy in central Africa.

RTE: Father Theotimos, will you begin by tracing the early history of Christianity in Africa?

FR. THEOTIMOS: First of all, no one doubts that Christ walked in the flesh in Mesopotamia and in Egypt, on the continent of Africa. Only these two continents. This is a great blessing for us.

Later, when the Romans took the Lord to be crucified, they had to find a non-Jew to help carry the cross. Because of ritual uncleanness, Hebrew tradition forbade a Jew to even touch a cross, so when they saw an obvious foreigner, a dark-skinned man, they stopped him and ordered him to help. This was Simon the Cyrenian, from what is now modern-day Libya. But this is not all. The Gospel of St. Mark tells us that Simon had two sons, Rufus and Alexander. According to Orthodox tradition, after the resurrection, one of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus was Cleopas and the other was Alexander, the son of Simon the Cyrenian.

RTE: Was Simon already a follower of the Lord at the time of the crucifixion?



*Fr. Theotimos, St. Thomas the Apostle Church, Athens.*



Congolese Orthodox Church.

FR. THEOTIMOS: No, he was there incidentally. He would not have been among those who followed the Lord closely, because it wasn't allowed by Hebrew tradition for an ethnic foreigner to follow a Hebrew group. However, many foreigners – remember the Roman centurion and the woman of Canaan – knew of Christ, although they were not in the circle of his disciples. So, there is the possibility that Simon's children could have been "followers" at a distance. In any case, Alexander wasn't simply a passerby on the road to Emmaus. He already had some connection with the Christian community because he was talking with Cleopas about Christ.

Also, Acts 13 mentions a disciple from Antioch named "Simeon, called Niger," (meaning that he was black), and later Philip instructs the eunuch of Queen Candace of Ethiopia.

RTE: Can you tell us about Christianity's later emergence in Africa? We know about the desert fathers in northern Africa, but how far south did Christianity reach in those early centuries?

FR. THEOTIMOS: This is the subject of my second book, which is in Greek. From the founding of the Church at Alexandria by the Evangelist Mark to our current Patriarch Petros VII, there have been one hundred eleven successively elected Orthodox patriarchs of Alexandria. If the history of African Christianity were to be written, it would take many volumes.

But why is the Evangelist Mark considered the founder of the Alexandrian Patriarchate? Why was he accepted there? This was because his Jewish parents had family roots in Africa, also in Cyrene, and this is why he went to Africa to preach. The Church in Africa, the Patriarchate of Alexandria is older than the Church of Greece. Why? Because Mark was in Alexandria before Paul went to Greece. This is why you see a patriarch of the Church of Alexandria in the first century, whereas Greece hardly had bishops yet. This was the first phase of African Christianity.

Now when we speak of first-century Africa, we are not talking about Africa below the Sahara. Sub-Saharan Africa had not yet developed into cities. It was composed of small tribal groups here and there, like the native tribes of North America. When Christianity first came to northern Africa, many people followed local tribal religions, as well as those who worshipped the Greek and Roman gods. By the seventh century, although northern Africa wasn't 100% Christian, Christianity was very well-established.

RTE: George Alexandrou, the Greek journalist/historian, has shown that there were extensive trade routes and many people going down into sub-Saharan Africa in the first century. Do you feel there could have been any early missionary work there via those routes?

FR. THEOTIMOS: It was not at all impossible that some Christians had gone further south before the seventh century, but because we don't have written or oral traditions left, we simply don't know. The 7th to the 13th centuries was a long period of war between the sub-Saharan Africans and the Muslims, which made it almost impossible for European Christians to go there. Sub-Saharan peoples were afraid of invasion and didn't allow foreigners in. It was only when they began building states that trade and exchange began. Our first modern record of Christians in sub-Saharan Africa is in the 18th century.

With the destruction of Alexandria, many important early Christian records and texts disappeared. We have a clear idea of African history beginning only with the seventh century. As Islam spread and Arab Muslims invaded northern Africa, the choice for many African Christians (and those who still held to tribal religions) was to convert or die. Both the Christian Africans and those of native faiths had to find refuge, and this is when they began to move *en masse* below the Sahara. Many died on the way.

Those who stayed intermarried with the Muslim Arab conquerors and this is why we have the contemporary mulattos of northern Africa. Today's northern Africans are not pure African in any sense. They are mixtures of Europeans, Africans and Muslim Arabs – because of the advance of Islam, sub-Saharan Africa began a new age.

RTE: Weren't the desert fathers and early North African Christians also a part of that multi-cultural society? Alexandria and other large cities of northern Africa were centers of Greek and Roman culture and there was enormous trade along the coast.



FR. THEOTIMOS: Yes, northern Africa has always been a melting pot – Africans had mixed and intermarried with Romans, Greeks, and Jews for centuries.

RTE: After the Islamic conquest, what happened to the Christians in the south?

FR. THEOTIMOS: Although Islam conquered politically, it was never able to completely extinguish Christianity in northern Africa. As I said, we have an unbroken line of Alexandrian patriarchs, as we do in Jerusalem. For those who were left, the situation was like modern-day Palestine where the Christians have mostly been forced out, or in Saudi Arabia, where it is forbidden to have an Orthodox Christian church, although a small group of Christians may pray together unofficially.

Those who fled south either continued with their Christian faith or they intermarried and mixed with local pagan groups. Most who remained Christian settled in Ethiopia and Eritrea, which were already Christian.

The Ethiopian Christians are Copts, and they have been illumined by God, Who gave them their written script. Before this, Sub-Saharan Africa had no written language, only oral traditions; only Ethiopia had a written language. Many of those who decided to remain Christian stayed there. Christians who went beyond Ethiopia may have held out for a few generations or so, but they or their descendants were eventually absorbed into local native religions.

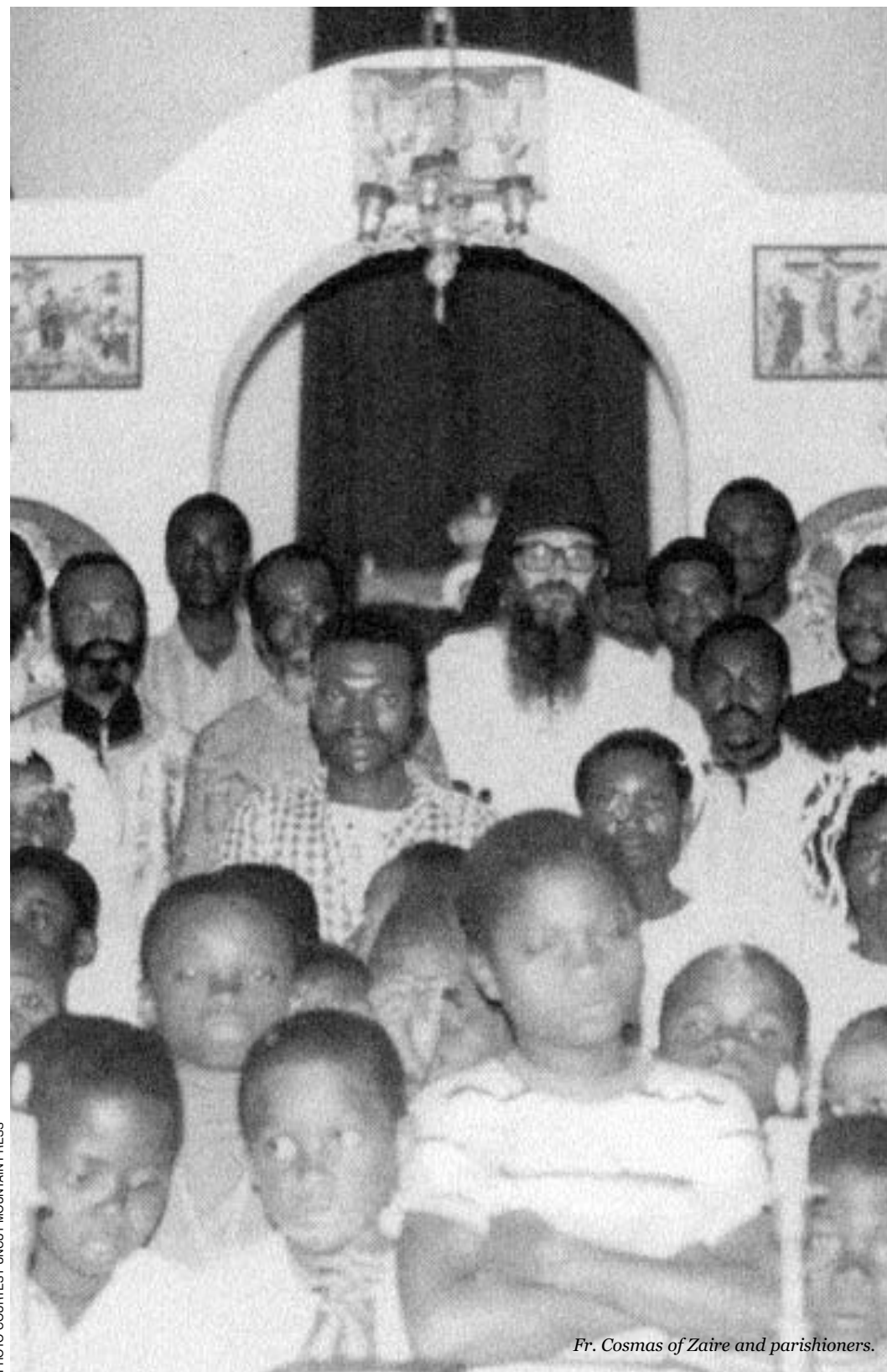


PHOTO COURTESY UNCUT MOUNTAIN PRESS

Fr. Cosmas of Zaire and parishioners.

RTE: Are there any remnants of those early Christian contacts?

FR. THEOTIMOS: Not consciously, except in Ethiopia. Nevertheless, it is very easy for Africans to become Christian when they hear the truth. The other-worldly orientation of native African spirituality is very close in some ways to that of Orthodoxy.

RTE: I'd like to return to that later, but can we change course now and ask you when and how you became Orthodox?

FR. THEOTIMOS: I am from the Congo, which was formerly called Zaire, and during the 1970s Greek missionaries came to Kolwezi, my town, and built a Byzantine-style church. We passed it on the way to school, and seeing the crosses went in one day to see what it was. The Orthodox there told us, "Come on Sunday for a service." I went to a liturgy, and was very touched. I was twelve years old at the time and I decided to become Orthodox. I went through catechism, they baptized me and gave me a cross and I went home

to my family and announced: "From now on, on Wednesdays and Fridays, we fast!" (*laughter*).

Orthodoxy in Africa is known as, "the faith where they fast on Wednesday and Friday." If people know that you are Orthodox, they automatically say, "it's Wednesday, he's not eating." But if you eat meat or fish on Wednesday or Friday, the non-

Orthodox will say, "He's not Orthodox, he's a liar." Over time, my entire family became Orthodox, except for two elder brothers who had already left home. Eight children and my parents became Orthodox.

The first missionary in Kolwezi was Fr. Amphilochios Tsouhos, who is still alive in Rhodos. He is about seventy and is a holy man. In 1986, two Greek nurses who were helping us in Africa took my sister, Thecla, to the Greek island of Kalymnos, to a monastery, where she stayed for sixteen years, and became the first African Orthodox nun. At that time I worked with Fr. Cosmas of Grigoriou Monastery, and knew the Greek bishop who was the head of the seminary in Zaire. Although I was still young, I was allowed to attend, to listen to classes. I didn't speak in class, but when the

seminarians had to pass their final exams, the instructors said, "If you like, you can also sit for the exam." I did and passed.

The others who were older became priests, but because I was still young, the Bishop asked me to go to Greece to study. After finishing high school in Zaire, I went first to Mt. Athos, to Simonos Petros, then to the diocese of Pirgos in the Peloponnese, where I learned Greek. Later, I came to study theology at the University of Athens.

I had thought of becoming a monk, but before my parents passed away, they said, "You should get married." I had never worried my parents, and now I thought, "If I'm not obedient to them, they will die in sorrow." So I said, "Alright, pick out a girl you like and send her to me. But the girl should know that I'm going to be a priest." So she came, and we were married. I'm sure my parents passed away satisfied.

By God's will I ended up here in Athens and I'm the priest now of the church of St. Thomas the Apostle. My sister, Thecla is back in Zaire on mission. She is an iconographer and an ecclesiastical seamstress and is trying to start a skete in Zaire, but it is not easy.

### Fr. Cosmas Aslanidis, Apostle to Zaire

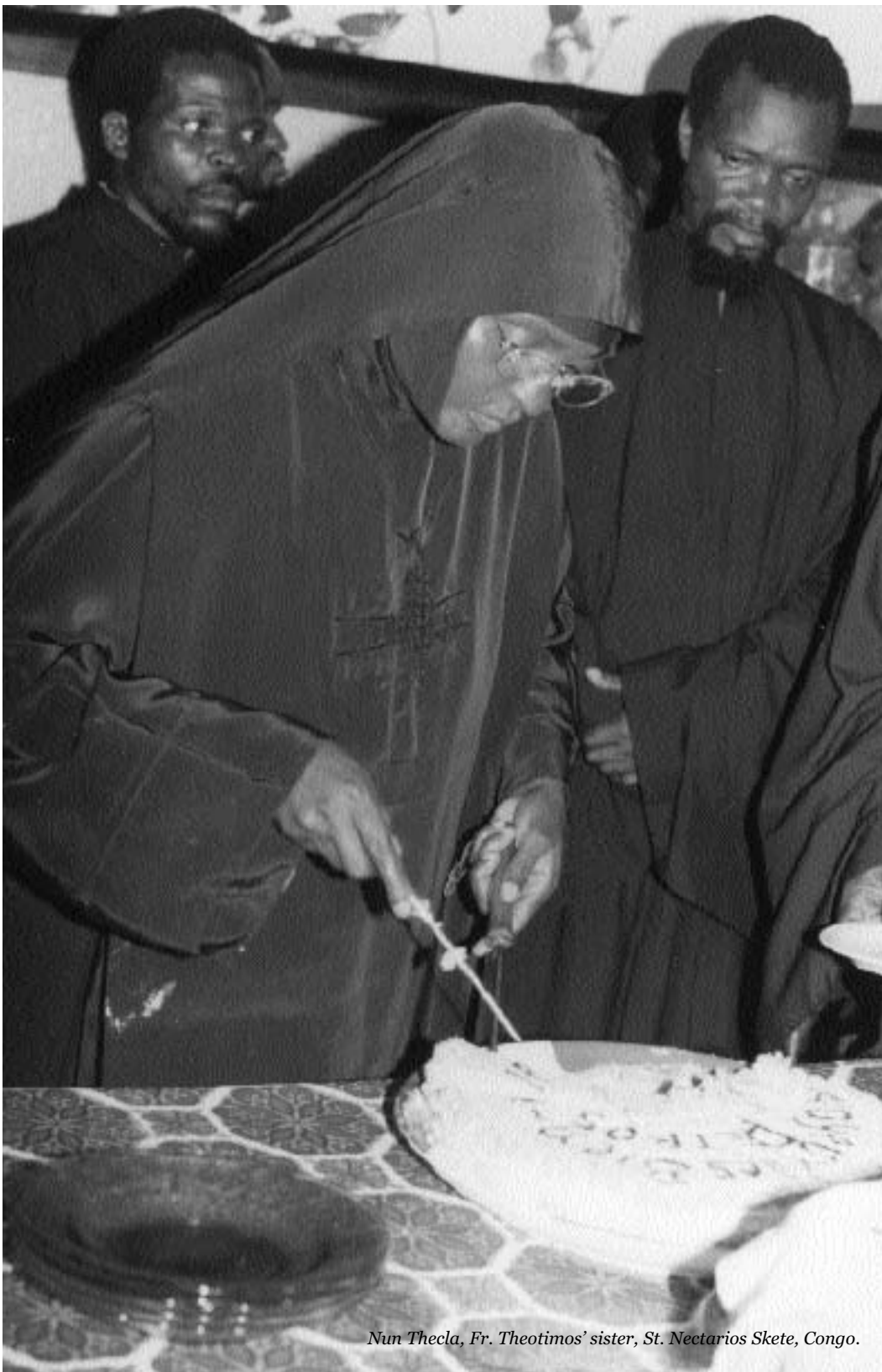
RTE: You mentioned Fr. Cosmas Aslanidis, who has been called "The Apostle to Zaire." You were his spiritual son, weren't you? Can you tell us about him?

FR. THEOTIMOS: Yes. Fr. Cosmas was a Greek who first came to Zaire as a layman. His name was Ioannis Aslanidis, and we first knew him as Yannis. He built many churches in the villages and was very loved. He returned to Greece, was ordained a hieromonk and came back to Africa in 1977 as head of the local mission. I was only in high school when he returned, but he took me as his secretary. I lived with him at the mission center, with a few other young men. Each of us had a special job.

He was a person of great energy and courage, and very quick with everything he did. If he told you, "Sweep the floor," he expected that before he finished his sentence you would have grabbed the broom. If he told you, "We're going to cut some wood," before he stood up, the first piece should have already been cut.



Fr. Theotimos



*Nun Thecla, Fr. Theotimos' sister, St. Nectarios Skete, Congo.*

He was practical, he made no rash promises, but he never wasted time. When he started a construction project, he intended it to be finished in two months. For me it was good, but for others around me it was exhausting. Those who didn't understand said, "Oh, he's rushing, he wants everything in a hurry," but others entered into his spirit, and I was one of them.

Fr. Cosmas' plans for the mission always succeeded. He wasn't stopped by the times, the hour, the seasons, war, obstacles, needs. Some people say, "Oh, my head aches," or "the weather is bad" or "someone is speaking against me," but these kinds of problems didn't exist for Fr. Cosmas. He was as free as a prophet, nothing stopped him. If there were roadblocks because of political or civil conflicts, he didn't care – he just made his way through. He would stop in front of the barriers, offer food to the guards and say, "I'm on your side, I'm on your side." That was the kind of man he was and why everything he did succeeded.

I was with Fr. Cosmas many times in the villages. Whenever we went together to catechize, he showed great love and care for people. He gathered many village children into the city to educate them. They were like his own children and he was sorry if they didn't do their homework, if they wouldn't study. He always said, "Progress a little every day." Unfortunately, the village children had a different mentality, but Fr. Cosmas didn't understand village psychology. As soon as village children came to the city and put on shoes and a watch, they thought that they had attained everything, and refused to study anymore. The city children, however, knew better and studied hard. Fr. Cosmas was sometimes saddened about things like this, but he never gave up. He was a real father.

He wasn't greedy, he didn't keep money, he helped everyone. If you had a problem, he solved it for you before you came to the end of your explanation. He had this kind of gift. He was a person for whom problems were made to be solved. He was even sorry if there were no problems to solve. Sometimes people lied to him about things they needed, but after he had been in Zaire for some time, he understood this. He could tell when a problem was true and then he would always help, but if someone tried to use him, he also understood this. When he first came to Zaire he was fooled several times, so afterwards, if someone told him a sad story he would say, "Alright, let's go to your home." He'd leave his work and go to the person's home to check. If they were telling the truth, he would give what was needed. He was very fair and just.



Fr. Cosmas did not discriminate between people: Orthodox or not, good or bad. People would come to him and say, “Watch out. This man’s a thief, he’s a liar, he’s evil ...,” but even though Fr. Cosmas heard what people said, he would deal with it in his own way. He would even welcome a thief. “What do you need, what do you want? Do this job for me, then take what you need.” He would put him to the test – would he change or would he stay a thief? If he changed, he was very happy. If he didn’t change, he would tell him, “So, I had the right information about you, but I wanted to see for myself.”

Once, after a fellow was caught stealing corn from the mission’s fields, Fr. Cosmas put him in his car and took him home to his wife. He said to her, “Look at this, your husband is a thief. This is the corn he’s been stealing.” His wife said, “Of course. He steals at night and then we sell it in the morning at the market.” Fr. Cosmas told him, “If you steal again you’ll go to prison.” He always gave thieves a chance, he didn’t take them directly to prison.

He was a person who wanted to help, to give himself. He feared nothing because he had God in him. He never said, “This can’t be done.” He’d say, “Let’s try.” Unfortunately, I had to leave him: my goal was to come to Greece to study, and he was sorry when I left. Three years later he passed away, but before he died, he came to Greece, and told me, “You are my own child. Never forget your homeland. We are foreigners in your country. Someday we will go, and you must come back to your home.” He planned for me to return to the Congo and take his place, but after his death the mission administration changed, and I wasn’t allowed to return.

For myself, I don’t push, I don’t force, I only wait for God’s will. When I wasn’t wanted by the church authorities in Zaire, I could have gone anyway. It is my country and I could have made an issue of it and had them recalled to Greece. I didn’t, but my sister, Thecla, said, “I’m going home. If they try to send me away, the way they did you, I will accuse them.” She’s still there, but I couldn’t do this. I was raised with obedience. The church administration has changed now, so perhaps in the future....

The work that Fr. Cosmas did, no one else could have done. The work that he did in thirteen years couldn’t have been accomplished by someone else in thirty. This was the man.

RTE: How did Fr. Cosmas die?

FR. THEOTIMOS: He was in a rush to get to another city, 300 kilometers away. The road was empty, there was no other traffic and he was driving fast, as he



did everything. A relative of mine was in the passenger seat, and in the back was Dionysios Kivetos, the Greek consul. A truck unexpectedly came from the other direction and hit the side of their car, turning it over many times. The car was demolished. At the moment of the accident, Fr. Cosmas was singing the dismissal hymn from the service for his own saint, Cosmas of Aitolia. Miraculously, my relative only had a concussion, the Greek consul didn’t have a scratch, but Fr. Cosmas died instantly. It was God’s will.

Fr. Cosmas always carried holy things with him, like a chalice to celebrate liturgy, holy myrrh, and other things needed for baptism. When the crash occurred, everything was flung into the field, but no one realized it. After a few days someone from a nearby village found the holy myrrh. He didn’t know it was myrrh, he thought it was some kind of oil and said, “Look, we’re going to cook with oil today.” Another person found the chalice, and said, “Now we’re going to drink water with a golden cup.” Fr. Cosmas appeared to them that same night and said, “This is holy myrrh, if you dare to cook with it you will die,” and to the other, “The chalice is holy, it is not for you. You have to take these things to the priests I belong with at the mission in Kolwezi.” He appeared to both of them separately.

Other things were found in the field as well, but because these were poor villagers and the mission was far away, they didn't have money for everyone to go, so they collected enough to send one of them with the things. This man brought them, trembling. "A priest came and spoke to us. These are the things he told us to give back." Everyone knew that it was a miracle. The missionaries filled a car with food, cooking oil, and household goods: dishes, pots, glasses, cups, and took the man back to the village with the gifts. Afterwards, this village was catechized and now they are building a church. See what a miracle was performed! Even death didn't stop him. You won't find another Fr. Cosmas.

### Contemporary African Mission

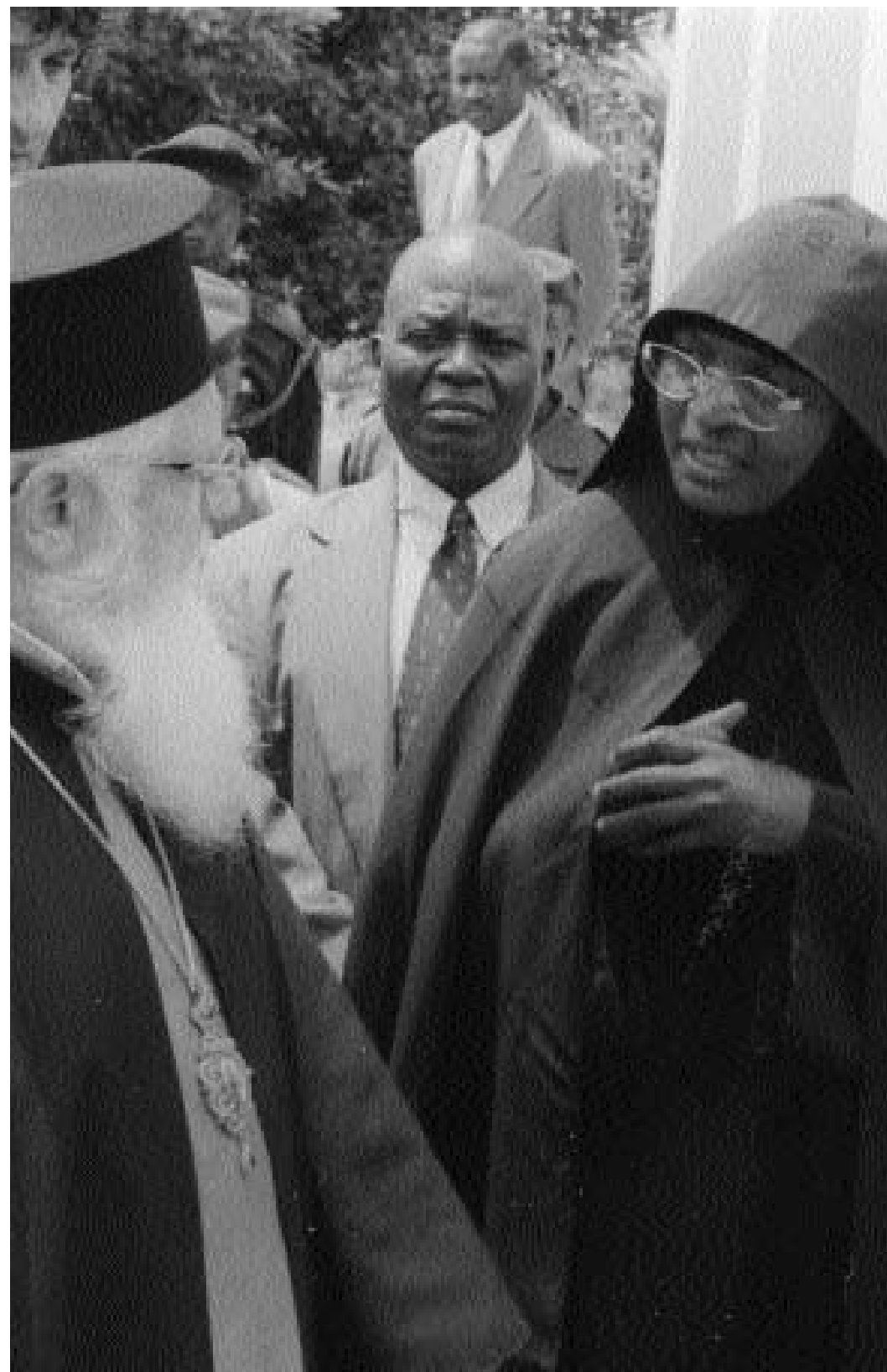
RTE: Can we talk now about current missionary practice? In the West we sometimes hear of Christian groups using philanthropy as a way to encourage non-Christian peoples to convert; distributing food, clothing, offering education. How do you see this?

FR. THEOTIMOS: Other Christian confessions do this, we don't. First of all, the Orthodox are poor. The first thing the Orthodox do is to build a church, then they speak to others about Orthodoxy. If we have an excess of food or money, we give out medicine or build a small clinic for everyone. If there are donors, a school can be built as well, but it is not our practice to distribute goods as a way to get people to church.

RTE: We also hear complaints of ethnic peoples being pressured to inculcate into western society through colonial-type missionary work. Does this happen in Zaire?

FR. THEOTIMOS: Just as Satan fell from the heavens, his deeds are seen, because Satan is not a person. A person has contact with other people, and this is how society is created, this is how an environment is affected: environment, person, society. Satan is not a person, he has no society, no community, no environment. The devil's environment is hell.

Many Christian missionaries are sincere, but some have come to Zaire, to Congo, I'm sorry to say, for their own prestige at converting numbers of







people, and some of these well-known churches have even helped the corporations who funded their missions to steal our natural resources. They build institutions for “us,” but they aren’t our institutions and they use them to make us into something else. These churches have no personality, no communion, and no environment. They are isolated. I know this sounds harsh, but I’ve seen it myself.

The Orthodox do not do this. An Orthodox missionary comes as a person and creates a community. He shows people that, “You and I are going to live in Paradise.” This is a real environment, a real community. He doesn’t say, “Become like us.” This is why the Orthodox are gaining souls.

RTE: How do you introduce things that may be different from your usual cultural practices, like outer behavior or dress in church?

FR. THEOTIMOS: We have our own customs, but our people have also watched other Christian groups, and adopted their good habits. In women’s dress, for example: when women first go to the Orthodox church, they wear a scarf because they know that in other churches this is also done. This is a good thing. There are also many men who don’t go into church in short pants, even when it’s very hot. They wear long trousers.

Often you will see someone clasp their hands together to pray because they have seen Protestants or Catholics do this. This isn’t bad, they are praying. Also Africans don’t say “Shhh,” and the priests never say, “Quiet! Silence!” We have a sign on which is written, “Silence” and whenever there is a noise, our old women quietly approach with the sign. People stop talking and the prayer goes on. Protestants do this also, and we’ve borrowed it from them. It’s a good practice.

RTE: Besides church feasts, what kinds of social activities do you have?

FR. THEOTIMOS: Once a month after Divine Liturgy everyone brings food and musical instruments, and they eat, sing, and dance together into the night. This keeps them from being tempted to go to other places such as magic dances, and helps our young people meet each other so they can find Christians to marry.

RTE: How many Orthodox are there in the Congo?

FR. THEOTIMOS: The number of the Orthodox must be close to one million people in Congo. There isn’t a reliable number for the whole of Africa because of the constant mass baptisms.

RTE: What is the most hopeful and inspiring thing for you about the Orthodox communities in the Congo?

FR. THEOTIMOS: I had an inspiration about this question last night. Any Greek who has come to the Congo can tell you that every Congolese has a small pocket Bible. We are 56 million people, and fifty million of us have a small Bible. Those who are preaching the Bible have a larger one with a zipper, and they walk with it under their arm. If you see an African walking with a black briefcase, its not really a briefcase, it’s a Bible.

Visiting foreigners always notice our great number of churches. Every street has at least two churches, generally non-Orthodox. In Zaire, on Saturday evening and Sunday morning, if you go to visiting you won’t find anyone at home. They are at those churches worshipping. Even the sectarian “Christian” groups who don’t have churches do open-air services. They gather two, three thousand people. Can you imagine if they moved into the truth of Orthodoxy?

There are almost fifty million non-Orthodox Christians in the Congo, who believe in Christ. They speak about repentance, about the Second

Coming, but they don't teach the fullness of Christianity. Yesterday, I was saying to myself, "If God would illumine these people who already believe in repentance, in the Crucifixion and Resurrection, to believe in the Mother of God and the saints, it would be like a spark to a match. The Mother of God has great power and I believe that Africa, particularly the Congo, is the future of Christianity. People may have no food to eat, but they have the word of God.

### Marriage, Polygamy, AIDS, and African Views of Death

RTE: Polygamy exists in many parts of the world. Has it been a part of traditional culture in the Congo as well?

FR. THEOTIMOS: It is one of our greatest problems, but it isn't really a religious or social problem, it's a question of economics. Because the families are agricultural, women traditionally do most of the fieldwork. The women go to the fields and the men stay at home and care for the children. When the women come home with the produce, the husband goes out to sell it and keeps the money. With the extra money he gains from the labor of a second or third or fourth wife, he can marry yet again, and they all live better. He brings the new wife home and says, "This is my new wife, she will live in that hut, and in the morning when you go to the fields take her with you." It's an economic situation.

In the cities where the man earns a wage, he usually has only one woman. In the villages, now, it is not as necessary for someone to have two or three wives because the men are learning collective farming. They no longer need to send the women to the fields. The men have begun to cultivate and organize together, and in this way, the economic reasons for polygamy are gradually disappearing.

RTE: How has the Church dealt with people who decide to become Christian but already have several wives?

FR. THEOTIMOS: If someone wants to be baptized he comes for catechism for two or three years, and then he chooses which wife he will continue to live with after baptism. They are married in the Church, and the others become

like sisters. They live in different huts, and the missionaries help the "sisters" to make a living by growing or making things they can sell in the market.

RTE: It's very charitable, but seems rather hard on the wives who weren't chosen.

FR. THEOTIMOS: If they can find another husband, they can marry and leave.

RTE: And the children?

FR. THEOTIMOS: In our society, the children belong to the father. Under civil law, a man can have many wives, but all of the children are registered under the name of the husband and his first wife. This was so even before Christianity and is part of our tribal law. Even state subsidies go to the husband so that he can care for the children. Once he becomes Christian the children of all of the mothers are the responsibility of the father and the wife he married in church. Of course, the children can visit and even live with their natural mothers if they want to, but their father is responsible for them.

RTE: Is AIDS widespread in the Congo, like other places in Africa?

FR. THEOTIMOS: Yes, but we look at this differently than you do. About one million people in the Congo have HIV or AIDS. Many have died. But in Africa there is no cancer. Cancer is in Europe and America. If one million people are dying of AIDS in Africa, one million are dying here in Europe from cancer. It's all in God's hands.

When they told Elder Paisios of Mt. Athos that cancer was killing many people, he replied, "Cancer has brought many people to Paradise. The majority of people who have cancer repent and go to heaven." And in Africa, AIDS has also had a good moral effect. The only reason we have AIDS is polygamy. Nothing else. Prostitution is almost nonexistent, and now people only marry virgins. People are realizing, "Instead of two or three wives, it's better to have one and to control yourself." Thanks to AIDS, families are becoming stronger and more unified. We need to look at things theologically and not from a worldly standpoint. Even non-Christian Africans look at things spiritually.

RTE: How is that?

FR. THEOTIMOS: In Africa there is a great natural spirituality. For example, the African person is not afraid of death because, from his traditional other-



worldly attitude, the African already knows that death is not the end. But the European shakes and trembles at death, even though he may be an Orthodox Christian who knows that Christ rose from the dead and who believes in the final resurrection. Still, he is afraid because he doesn't have that inner conviction. The Apostle Paul says, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain...I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart and to be with Christ; which is far better...." The African knows this feeling. For the African, death means that I am going somewhere else to go on with my life, but for the European, "I'm going to leave my car, my house..." (*laughter*). And so, the European is captive and the African is free.

Death is hard for the European and I'm sorry to have to say that, but I see it often. Europe doesn't have a living tradition of the presence of the Holy Spirit, although the Russians do. St. John of Kronstadt, for instance, and St. Theophan the Recluse, and St. Seraphim of Sarov taught about this, but not in Europe. Westerners are bound to the material world.

RTE: Even if Africans aren't afraid of death, isn't there sorrow when someone dies?

FR. THEOTIMOS: In Zaire, you can't tell that a funeral is a funeral. You would think you were at a reception, that they are expecting someone, but it's the opposite; someone's leaving. This is true of everyone, Christian and non-Christian. They dance and sing during the funeral. It's different than what happens here.

## Pre-Christian African Spirituality

RTE: What forms, then, did this underlying spirituality take among sub-Saharan pre-Christian Africans?

FR. THEOTIMOS: First of all, as an introduction, we should say, that their belief was spirit worship (or veneration), but the Africans were not idolaters. When I say this, I mean that they didn't have many gods like the Greeks. The Greeks had twelve specific gods, and this is idolatry. This concept does not exist in the African mind.

The majority of sub-Saharan Africans, the Bantu, shared the same philosophy, focusing primarily on the supernatural: on spirits, on eternity and on love. Pre-Christian Africans venerate both the spirits of their ancestors and the supreme Spirit, which is God. Philosophically, this is like the "seminal seed" of Blessed Augustine; the impulse of the soul towards God and the otherworld that each human being carries within himself. Africans also believe in eternal life, that death is only a crossing over from earthly life to eternity. Meeting Christianity clears the existing confusion and opens the way to real faith; eternal spirits are revealed as those of the saints and angels, and the Supreme Spirit is the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Bantu believe in the spirits and in all the heavenly bodiless powers as immortal beings. They also observe the visible nature in relation to the invisible one, so that in their wanderings they attach themselves to the supernatural rather than to nature. By tradition, the resolution of their problems does not depend on their skill and experience but on divine revelation. Consequently, they gradually move closer to the long searched-for truth. This somewhat resembles God's revelation through the Apostle Paul to the Athenians. As the Athenians passed from idolatry to Christianity, the Africans passed to Christianity from the veneration of the spirits.

The African people are naturally otherworldly and this is contrary to the average European. Europeans are very skilled in development, in technology, manufacturing, even in "manufacturing" ideas, but they are materialistic, while the African goes beyond the material. He's not as interested in material things.

RTE: This is fascinating. Can you explain a little further how this supernatural world-view developed?

FR. THEOTIMOS: The traditional approach of many African peoples to the sacred began like this: because they didn't know that God had created them, in their first reaching towards the otherworld they would go to the graves of their ancestors, and say, "You the ex-person who was a good hunter, help me when I go out hunting." This is a little like we pray to saints, but in this case it was the person's physical, earthly attributes that were coveted. Anthropologically, this is called "worship of the dead," but as you can see, it's not worship in the sense of adoration.

Later, the local tribes or culture progressed to realizing that although the dead person is truly dead, his spirit somehow still lives and instead of calling to him only over his grave, they could call upon him anywhere in spirit. This is the "invocation of spirits," calling upon the spirits of the dead. This is the second stage.

After a culture has gone through this second stage, they begin using the reposed person's physical belongings – his hair, cup, clothes – and wearing them as fetishes to bring good luck. This is the third stage, when they begin calling on the spirit of the dead person through his objects. This has an outward Christian analogy in our veneration of relics of the saints, but in Christianity this is not because of the natural qualities of the person, but because the supernatural grace of God has manifested in him. His body, his bones, are also blessed through association with that grace. In Acts, Peter's shadow healed people, and after St. Paul went to Ephesus, people would bring handkerchiefs and aprons to him to touch. When they touched them to the ill and possessed, they were healed.

Now we come to the fourth stage. The fourth stage of native religion is the recognition that every object that has helped or protected the reposed (or even hurt him) automatically becomes a "totem." If an animal killed the ancestor, he becomes a bad totem. If a mountain or a hill or a cave helped an ancestor survive or he hid in it successfully during a war, then that becomes a totem. A good totem usually means "something that protects." And all the descendants of that person from now on will respect and take care of that object. It isn't that they adore or worship the object, they just respect it.

This is where Western investigators were mistaken. They claim that we Africans worship the mountains and different aspects of nature, but this is not true. This view is absolutely wrong. I am writing on this theme for my Ph.D, and the Greek professors have become very excited over this detail. They had no idea of this.



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*Seminary in Kinshawa, Congo.*



Western missionaries and colonialists deliberately identified totemism with the veneration of the spirits of the ancestors, while totemism is nothing but a natural current that characterizes the relations between man and the environment. It would have been absolute confusion if totemism was idolatry (in the classical sense as in ancient Greece). While Africans did honor anything in nature that helped them to survive, it was only as reverence due to a beneficial gift of the Supreme Spirit, and Western scholars never really understood this. Totemism can only be understood as reverence, in the same way that Christians pay honor to sacred altar vessels and objects.

The Holy Spirit, present but hidden in fallen human nature, is the proof of our divine descent, of every human having been made in the image of God whether he lives in a tribe, a community or a nation. There are almost no Christian peoples on earth who didn't pass gradually from paganism to the revelation of the True Faith. Such is the case with Africans who have come to accept the Triune God. And, of course, there are still peoples who are going through previous stages.

Nowadays in the Congo and everywhere on earth (even if people met Christianity long ago) there are still communities living as pagans. It is a long way to becoming a perfect Orthodox Christian.

RTE: How do you begin to talk about Christianity to non-Christians?

FR. THEOTIMOS: As a people, we believe in the spirits of our ancestors, and pagan Africans are usually aware of the idea of God as the Great Spirit. They believe in this. So, when the missionaries tell them, "Yes, this Great Spirit is God, and this Spirit became human, and that person is Jesus Christ, and whoever believes in Him and does what He says will become holy," they understand.

I tell them, "You don't have to call on the spirits of your ancestors anymore. You don't know if they were holy people or not. Instead, you can call on the spirits of the saints who we know are close to God. We have their icons, and we can ask them to speak to Christ, to pray for us. Don't wear the fetish of your ancestors, wear a cross instead. Respect holy water and holy myrrh, because it will do you good. If you see a cross, make the cross yourself, because it is through the cross that Christ saved us." They can accept this like a totem. We don't worship the cross itself, we venerate it. We only worship Christ in the Holy Trinity. They already knew about these concepts, but in a different way, not in their fullness.

The beginning of spirit worship in Africa was nothing more than the veneration of the spirits of their ancestors, but once magic entered in, this became a great problem for us. Spirit worship has ended badly for the African people. As I said, they are not idolaters, but their natural love for the Holy Spirit was twisted by Satan into spiritism.

## Magic and Witchcraft

RTE: Since you've mentioned spiritism, Fr. Cosmas' biography includes vivid details of the practice of magic and witchcraft in Africa. Until our "new age" resurgence of magic, it had almost disappeared from western societies and was something many of us didn't believe in. Can you describe the African attitude towards magic and how the Church deals with this?

FR. THEOTIMOS: Yes. There is great ignorance about witchcraft and every person speaks about magic according to his own cultural notions. People who hear the word "magic" are sometimes confused, but the word "magic" is not a theological, philosophical, or anthropological category. Magic is satanism and demonism, it is pure sin. Whoever doesn't understand this is

confused, and if he becomes involved with magic, he will be harmed or may even die, physically and spiritually.

Do you remember Simon, the magician in the Acts? He had been baptized but he wanted to buy the gifts of the Holy Spirit from the apostles. Simon wanted to be Christian so that he could work miracles. He was treating it as a form of magic, but anyone who is involved in magic in any form is involved with sin.

RTE: How are African people caught up in magic?

FR. THEOTIMOS: It is a never-ending cycle. When a person begins calling on demons, these demons give him power to do evil to other people. He becomes a magician. The person who is being attacked by his evil then goes to a second magician and says, "Someone is doing bad to me, what can you give me so that he won't hurt me?" They want a defense against magic. The "good magician" gives him a fetish. "Wear this and the evil won't harm you." If this object is powerful, the evil of the other magician won't hurt him, but if the power of the second magician is lesser, then the person wearing this fetish will be destroyed. It is all very dangerous.

There are three kinds of magicians. First is the magician who does evil with the power of the devil. The second is a magician who claims to do "good." He uses evil power to bring "success" in work or in love, but watch closely – after receiving what he asks for, the life-span of his client will be shortened. If the client was supposed to live fifty years, he will only live for say, thirty-five, because, in exchange for the magic that does "good," the magician takes years from the victim as "payment" so that the magician himself will live longer. He does "good" to the victim temporarily, but then the victim dies young. Because he has bound himself to magic and to the magician, he will go to hell where he will have to work for the magician as an intermediary of the dead, helping him continue his dark works. But the victim doesn't realize this.

The third category of magicians is the "protector." He specializes in creating fetishes to protect victims from the magic of other magicians. Of course, all three types of magicians are working with the same power of Satan. The first magician who only does bad is known to be evil. The other two claim to do "good," and this is how war begins between magicians.

If someone becomes a magician, but afterwards changes his mind and tries to return to normal life, he must be killed because he knows the secrets

of magic. Where can he go so that he doesn't die? He turns to "good" magicians, thinking they can help him. Then, the bad magicians come together so that they can fight both the runaway and the "good" magicians who are working for his protection. Usually, the client dies and a long war commences between the "good" and bad magicians. Usually, either the "good" ones die, or they also turn bad and join the bad ones.

The conclusion is that the magician is only one. The one who kills, the one who protects, the one who brings good luck, they are all using the same demonic power. We know this in Africa. But how do we know this objectively? We know because there have been many cases where magicians will take another magician to court, and this is how we find out. The judges go wild with what they hear because there can be no material proof of magic.

RTE: Do any of the magicians repent and become baptized?

FR. THEOTIMOS: There are many cases when they run to the Church and ask to become Orthodox – sometimes because they are losing a battle with a stronger magician and know that they will die if they don't find protection. The first thing we do is to catechize them. They usually won't give away all of their magic at first because they are afraid of being killed by the other magicians. They aren't safe until they are baptized.

Sometimes one magician will say to the others, "Let us join the Church, so we can harm it from the inside," but in this case it is hard for them to even physically approach the church. For a magician to walk into a church is like walking into a furnace. Some magicians ask to be baptized, but afterwards secretly try to keep doing magic. When they go back to it, it burns them like fire. Then they realize the power of Orthodoxy and that they can't go back. This is when they really repent and become Christian; they tell this to the priest, and after bringing all their magic tools and implements, the priest burns them.

When they see this, the magicians who supported him in infiltrating the Church often become afraid and also give their magic tools to the priest. They understand that the true God is in the Church. Other magicians may decide to fight against the Orthodox Christian who has given up magic but, of course, once one becomes truly Orthodox the other magicians can't harm him.

RTE: So, Christians are always protected?



FR. THEOTIMOS: Orthodox Christians, yes. All Orthodox, especially the newly baptized who were previously involved with spiritism and magic, are encouraged to receive Holy Communion frequently. As long as they participate in Holy Communion they do not return to magic, nor can they be hurt. The devil himself is most afraid of Holy Communion, the Cross, and the Gospel.

RTE: What do you think of the Harry Potter books, which have also been translated into Greek?

FR. THEOTIMOS: We have a folk saying, “Children should not play with fire,” and we as Christians should not give examples of magic to our own families. We have so many other sins, why should we spread a work that is not Christian? If I give this to my children, I must be possessed also. In the West, you think that magic is a game. You need to wake up.

The Church Fathers reject everything that is not included in the patristic mind. In our homes we have only nice, clean food. In the same way we should have nice books and nice clothes. If your child starts buying shirts with demonic symbols and words or books that are unChristian, you have invited a demon into your home. This why we bless holy water in church and use it often, as well as frequently confessing and receiving Holy Communion – because of the society we live in.

For a time I was a car mechanic in the Congo, and once I was given the car of a government deputy minister to be fixed. I found the expensive spare part to replace the broken one, but then a co-worker stole it. I was about to go to prison. I told the director, “Someone stole this part from me.” The director asked everyone, but they said, “No, no, I didn’t take it.” In Africa, in cases like this, people often address themselves to a “seer,” who will say, “He did it.” So, the other mechanics decided that we should all go to the seer. As a Christian, I couldn’t do that, but if I refused they would say, “So, you are the guilty one!” Since I couldn’t do anything else, I said, “OK, let’s go.” But as we approached his house, the seer came out on the porch, pointed to me and said, “You – don’t come in here. You’ve got a cross on.” (It was under my shirt.) Do you see? He was a satanist and he couldn’t stand the cross.

RTE: Amazing. Did you ever get the part back?

FR. THEOTIMOS: Yes. Whoever had stolen the part went and put it back secretly.

## The Appeal of Orthodoxy

RTE: Your explanation of magic is something that few of us have ever heard. In the West, though, we do hear of large numbers of Africans turning to Christianity, and you’ve mentioned whole villages converting. What is it in the African people that makes Orthodox Christianity so appealing?

FR. THEOTIMOS: The most important thing is the hidden roots of Christianity that I mentioned before, the natural otherworldly spirituality in native African culture and mentality that can easily respond to the fullness of Christianity. Then, their disappointment with other Christian churches; the Orthodox aren’t involved with politics, they just come with the Word of God. Also, people see clearly that Christians in the Orthodox Church are protected from demonic forces. Finally, Africans are able to live the truth, the reality of Orthodoxy.

RTE: In what way?

FR. THEOTIMOS: The other Christians, even Roman Catholics no longer practice many traditions that the Orthodox continue, like fasting. When the Orthodox speak of fasting on Wednesday and Friday and during the four fasts, it is a major element in our spiritual practice. Fasting is a principle of Christian life because the Prophet Elias, St. John the Baptist, the Mother of God, and even the Lord Himself, fasted. Africans don’t play with fasting. I’m so sad that the Greeks, especially here in Greece, often don’t fast. When you say to an African person, “You should do this,” you who are teaching him should not do the opposite.

RTE: Why do you think it’s easier for Africans to accept the idea of fasting?

FR. THEOTIMOS: Because they used to make promises to their departed ancestors like, “If you do this for me, I won’t eat anything for two days for



you.” This was a common practice for thousands of years, and was already part of the culture.

Also, in Africa the magician is a killer, but the average African knows no hate. In Greece there is hate, people either love you or hate you, but in Africa there is no hate. The only person who hates is the magician. Most hatred is political, between warring groups, but this attitude of political conflict has been imported. It is not native to us.

RTE: But we all share Adam’s fall, so if someone steals a man’s wife, he’s not going to feel hatred?

FR. THEOTIMOS: No, not hatred. To give a personal example, my father was a brick manufacturer, and one of his workers (who had come many times to our home) began encouraging the other workers to kill my father. He was envious, because even though he and my father were the same age, my father was the boss. One of the workers came and told my father, “Be aware, Matthew said we are to poison you.” When the workers found out that father knew, they dropped the plan and Matthew disappeared. He was so afraid and ashamed to pass in front of our house that he would make a long detour to go home. He couldn’t get another job and became very poor, until one day father saw him from afar and said, “Hey, come here. Why don’t you come back to work?” He came to the porch with his head down, and father asked, “Matthew, why did you want to kill me? What had I done to you? I gave you work, and food and coffee in my home – if you had killed me, what would have happened to you? I forgive you. If you want a job again, come ask me.”

### Nostalgia for Paradise

FR. THEOTIMOS: Another thing that attracts people in the Congo are the many miracles that happen around our Orthodox Church. It’s like the early Christian times, an outpouring of God’s grace to help our people believe.

RTE: Can you tell us about any?

FR. THEOTIMOS: Yes. My sister Thecla has a small girls’ school in her skete, and one girl borrowed a catechism book from a teacher. The girl soon died,

and afterwards the teacher said, “This girl borrowed a book, where is the book now?” Books in Africa are very precious and hard to come by. The book belonged to the school and if it wasn’t returned they would have to take the price of the book out of the teacher’s salary. The book was one month’s salary, and the teacher was very sorry, because he didn’t know how they would find the book. That night my sister had a dream in which that girl said, “Don’t worry, I will bring the book.” A few days later the teacher was at school when he saw a girl coming in, whom he didn’t recognize. She said, “Teacher, take the book.” She gave him the book and disappeared right in front of him.

Another time, thieves came to break in and steal everything in the skete. When they tried to jump over the fence, they saw an old man in the air above the roof staring at them angrily, and because African people believe in magic, they said, “These people are magicians and their leader saw us and will kill us. Let’s go.” They went around town, and told everyone, “They are very powerful magicians. We saw their leader hanging in the sky.” This got back to my sister, who realized from their description that it was St. Nectarios of Aegina, whom the skete is named after.

There are many miracles, and from them people understand that something true is happening.

RTE: Wonderful. Do you have any words now for blacks in the West? Often they don’t feel a part of the culture they live in, but they feel even less a part of African culture.

FR. THEOTIMOS: This is the best question. I believe that a person who doesn’t feel at ease on earth is the right person for Paradise. This is the only truth he can accept. It was the same with Abraham. God said, “Leave here, go there.” Abraham didn’t know where he was going, and we are the same.

I probably should apologize for this, but I do not suffer from nostalgia for my country. My nostalgia is for Paradise, for heaven. I forget about the Congo, I forget about Greece. Just so, all of these African-Americans, Jamaicans, Haitians have all the qualifications for nostalgia for Paradise. They could very easily be caught for God, but it is necessary to preach to them. The same thing happened with the Samaritan woman at the well. Christ said, “*The time has come when the true worshippers of God will worship neither on the mountain, nor in Jerusalem, but in the Holy Spirit.*”

RTE: What do you feel is least understood about Africa and African Orthodoxy?

FR. THEOTIMOS: What you ask is what I am planning to write a book about. I have it in mind already. It begins with a person, a Greek who was a true missionary: Fr. Athanasios Anthides, who went to Africa in the sixties to teach. Although he didn't spend long in Africa, he understood its essence. When he returned to Greece, he met Greek missionaries going to Africa: "Where are you going?" "We are going to convert Africans to Christianity." He laughed and said, "It's you who are going to become Christian there, because before you even say a word, the African already catches it. The Africans are already Christian. They live Christianity: love, humbleness, obedience. In a few years all of Africa will be Orthodox. I am going to India, where there are Hindus and Muslims and millions of gods.' So, he left Africa for India and this is where my book begins. This truth is something that Greeks are not flattered to hear.

The other thing I want to say is not about Africa, it is about all of us. Whatever we do should be good for Paradise. As a layman I used to serve people very much and didn't give much attention to my family. I was always running to help other people and my wife was sorry for this. I told her that by helping others, God would help us. When I was ordained, however, a clairvoyant priest came to see me and said, "Love God more and serve Him more." But I had always loved God. I had the impression that by serving people, I was serving God, but in the end this wasn't God's will. God's will is for us to serve Him above all. So this is why we should always tell God, "Thy Will be done."

Everyone is now talking about globalization, about world unity. Both those who are for it and those who are against it say things that are right and wrong, but neither of them knows the future. As Christians, we have globalization already through the Blood of Christ.

The early Christians sold their property to have a common life. That was true unity, but we will never reach that level internationally because we are egotists. Only Christ Himself can change that fundamental orientation in us. Everything must be built on Him.

Sometimes Jehovah's Witnesses say, "Sell your belongings, and let's gather together like the first Christians because 'the rapture' is coming." This is one form of globalization but it is false. True unity is brotherhood, but it cannot be established through human effort, because we are all different. Only Christ can bring this about. For us Christians, the rulers and governments of

the world are not our business; we know that true life is not here, and that it will only begin with the Lord's coming.

Christians, live prophetically. Christ is coming! †