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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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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
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.”

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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.
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.

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 niptic 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.

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.saintanthonyssmonastery.com