

Today's Martyrs – Archbishop Dieudonne Nzapalainga CSSP



The Central African Republic capital of Bangui fell to the Seleka insurgency in March 2013 after seven months of fighting. Seleka (“Coalition” in the Sangho language) was composed almost entirely of Muslims, and imposed Michel Djotodia, a Muslim, as president. Up until this time the CAR had seen almost no instances of religious conflict. Christians comprised 50-80% of the population (the 30% difference is due to ‘syncretic’ Christians who still harbored animist beliefs), Muslims 15%, and animists the remainder.

All this was about to change. Large numbers of the Seleka fighters were jihadists from other countries including Chad, Nigeria and Sudan, and they attempted to radicalize the local Muslims. Since Christians under strict Islamic law – the sharia - are required to pay the jizya (tribute) to Muslims, the Seleka fighters took a liberal interpretation of this requirement and began to rob and extort from them.

The Christian churches in the CAR immediately opposed this violence. Archbishop Dieudonne Nzapalainga denounced the March 24, 2013 robbery of worshippers in front of the Bangui cathedral and suggested it was done as an act of intimidation against Christians. Weeks later on April 14 he denounced the extensive looting of the poor's meager possessions by the rebels; on the same day Seleka shelled the Protestant church led by Rev. Franco Mbaye-Bondoi, injuring him in the ear and killing seven parishioners. In May Archbishop Nzapalainga sent a letter to President Djotodia demanding an end to the atrocities and renunciation of a letter the President had sent to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation which stated “all Christians are liars” and “If by God’s will, we reach Bangui, we will set up an Islamic regime in order to apply the sharia”. The Archbishop’s letter was ignored.

The CAR continued its descent into a whirlwind of murder, rape, and plunder. In June 2013 the Bible Society in Central Africa was looted by Seleka rebels on the eve of the dedication ceremony of the translation of the Bible into Sangho. Several Protestant pastors were killed in the following months. By August missionary Fr Aurelio Gazzera reported that the Islamists were targeting Christians throughout the country and that “the bloodiest treatment has often been reserved for Catholic catechists”. On December 5, 2013 Bishop Juan Munos reported: “An apocalyptic day...Early in the morning I was at the [Bangui] airport when all of a sudden hell broke out: repeated shots were heard. A family in the neighborhood welcomed me into their home...Seleka are killing young Christians in all districts. We counted at least a hundred bodies in the streets”. Archbishop Nzapalainga rode in a convoy of African Mission in Central Africa [MISCA] peacekeeping soldiers to the airport in an effort to rescue Bishop Munos and others. The next day French troops arrived by helicopter and thousands rushed to the airport for refuge, sleeping in the grass alongside the runway.

By this time the citizens of the CAR had suffered enough. Local militias called anti-balaka (balaka means ‘machete’ in Sangho) began to organize and fight Seleka, but also began to attack local Muslims who were entirely innocent. Christians throughout the country began to protect and shelter Muslims, and now came under attack from both Seleka and anti-balaka. In February 2014 Archbishop Nzapalainga brought 10 Muslims into his home, including the city’s chief imam, and related a trip to Bouar “When I arrived there, part of one area of the town has been completely burned down. I also saw that people had been burnt alive. I saw human bones and human heads. I had only ever seen that sort of thing in films about Rwanda before, but never here with us. I think that evil was there. Now the evil has touched us. It shows itself in the desire to kill, to destroy. This is the devil...If there is no one to hold back the hand of the devil here, he will achieve his goal.”

President Djotodia resigned in January 2014 under diplomatic pressure and was replaced by Catherine Samba-Panza, an attorney educated in France. However, the number of peacekeepers remained small and anarchy continued. Priests continued to be abducted and murdered. Thousands of Christians and Muslims continued to find refuge in churches and cathedrals. In June 2014 Archbishop Nzapalainga led a relief convoy to a Muslim refugee camp in Yaloke where he said "I am here with the imam that I welcomed in my home for five months. It is not enough to say 'we must live together', but we need to translate these words into concrete actions...we will be back soon, we will not abandon you".

The international media has played up a false moral equivalence between Seleka and the “Christian” anti-balaka militias. Christians in the CAR including Archbishop Nzapalainga have denied this, saying that anti-balaka is led by animists and syncretic Christians who wear amulets and charms into battle. The truth is that the Christian churches in the CAR have been engaged in one of the most heroic episodes in the history of Christianity. They have been doing everything they can to save lives, including those of a competing faith who would turn on them if the jihadists had their way. While we pray for God’s deliverance, we should also thank God for the gift of Christians such as these.

Postscript: the fighting abated somewhat at the end of 2014, and despite death threats Archbishop Nzapalainga has spent some time visiting Seleka and anti-balanka prisoners and encouraging them to peacefully rejoin Central African society. In November 2016 he was named a Cardinal of the Catholic Church.

Today’s Martyrs
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