



70 ❧ Saved from suicide by a vision

When he enrolled in the Mennonite school at Mutena in 1954, Célestin Kabengela was required to repeat fifth grade, even though he was already eighteen years old and had successfully finished fifth grade at the Catholic school he had attended until then.

It may have been because the Catholic and Protestant systems were incompatible. It may also have been because his new teachers saw potential in the young Célestin that he didn't see himself. Célestin wanted to be a furniture maker. The head of the Mennonite school thought he could be a preacher and teacher. Later, when Célestin wanted to enroll in a military academy and successfully passed the entrance exam, this mentor told him, "We did not send you to study so that finally you would go serve in public administration or in the army."

Célestin never regretted being held back and redirected, but he had difficulty finding his own way. He studied pedagogy and the Bible with the Mennonites in Mutena, Tshikapa, and Ndjoko Punda. He became a teacher.

Even though he had been a good student, Célestin Kabengela did not live peacefully. In his early years, tormented by what he calls "a life crowned with failures," he even decided to commit suicide. But one day in Tshikapa, while he was awake, the future servant of God had a vision: a bright light, he explains, blinded him, and the Lord Jesus appeared to him saying, "Don't give in to your thoughts. Ask me

photo—Célestin Kabengela

for all that you desire!” And he retorted, “I want to have intelligence and wisdom. I want to be happy.”

This vision so greatly comforted Celestin that he really dedicated himself to the service of God in the will of the Lord. Although he had been baptized in 1954, he considers this vision his true conversion experience. After that he began to serve God as an evangelist and later a pastor, evangelist, school administrator, and church leader.

Speaking of the importance of his conversion and of his discipleship, Pastor Célestin Kabengela declares, “My conversion to God and my discipleship are two important roles that I had to enjoy in my life, because there is nothing more important than that.”

Although the testing has continued throughout his life, Célestin Kabengela remains attached to God while showing proof of a strong faith in him.

During the post-independence conflicts in 1962, Célestin was among those who fled the Tshikapa area and returned to their native area in southern Kasai. There he joined the staff of the church that would become the Evangelical Mennonite Church, led by Mathieu Kazadi. Célestin Kabengela was assigned to be evangelist of the Tshiaba Lutulu congregation, then consecrated elder of the church. In 1972, he was ordained as a pastor.

The leadership conflict that shook the CEM was particularly hard on him. People loyal to the faction of Zacharie Nkumbi bribed police and had him arrested and jailed briefly in 1985. Ten years later he was one of three church leaders who were kidnapped in Kinshasa and held captive for four days and nights by members of the national security service—again, it is believed, at the instigation of Nkumbi. Célestin and his companions were able to survive, thanks to the efforts of Jean Bokeleale, national president of the Church of Christ in Congo; Pierre Marini, his assistant and current national president; and other persons of goodwill.

Bernadette, his wife, has been struck by blindness for nearly two decades. His non-Christian family, friends, and many people outside the church advised him to repudiate her; but because of his faith and the vow of fidelity taken before God and the church, he accepted the role of participating in her suffering.

In his various roles, Pastor Célestin has left a remarkable imprint on the church by training and ordaining many other pastors, includ-

ing a number who left to join the Pentecostals and other groups, because of the lamentable conflicts in CEM.

One of his convictions, as he never ceased to affirm, is that “no one can claim to serve God if his Spirit is not with him.”

Jean Félix Chimbalanga