

Maputo Journal

In Marx's Garden: Atheism Wilts, Faith Blooms

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By JAMES BROOKE

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MAPUTO, Mozambique, May 5 — At the corner of Vladimir Lenin and Mao Zedong Avenues, hundreds of Mozambican students swarmed noisily out of classes, happy to be out in the sunshine after an afternoon spent memorizing a universal doctrine.

"Our enrollment is up from 30 children in 1980 to 1,500 today," said the satisfied school director, an Italian priest.

Despite the incongruous street address, the setting was a weekly Saturday afternoon Bible class at Our Lady of Victory Roman Catholic Church.

In nominally Marxist Mozambique, an experiment with atheism has tumbled in the face of African religious feeling.

John Paul Is Awaited

"We had seven Anglican churches close in this diocese," Dinis S. Sengulane, an Anglican bishop here, said of the repressive years immediately after Mozambique's independence from Portugal in 1975. "When they finally reopened, the buildings were too small for the congregations."

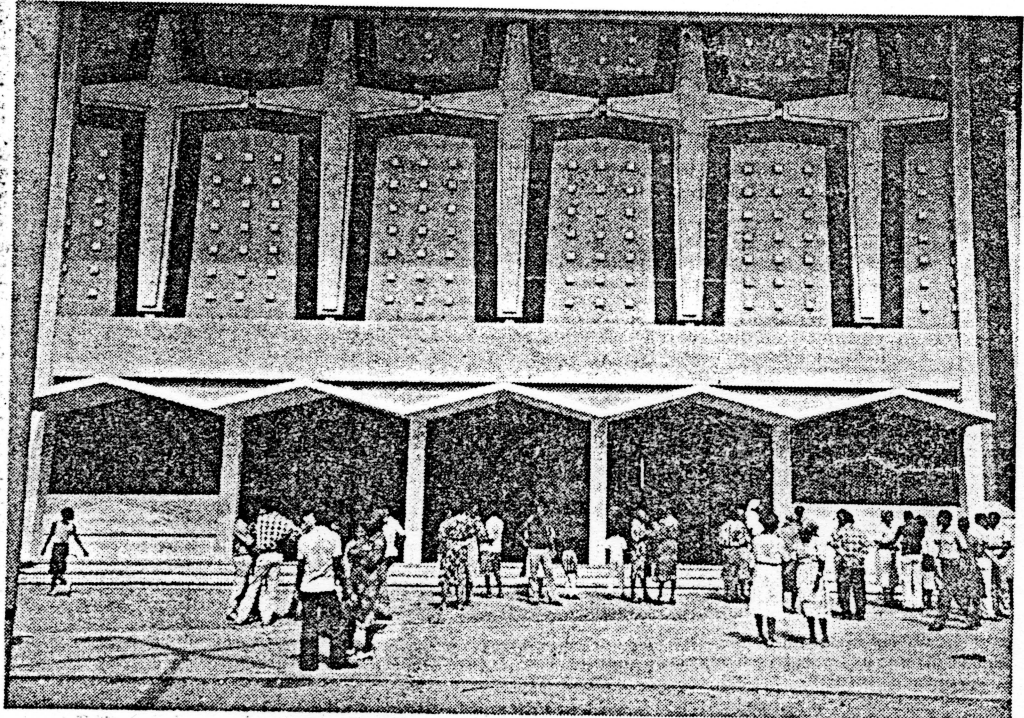
In a symbol of Mozambique's increasingly normal relations with the church, Pope John Paul II is expected to come here in September. It will be the first Papal visit to Mozambique.

Last year, in a deliberate gesture that few Mozambicans missed, the new President, Joachim Chissano, visited the Vatican before he visited Moscow.

The reconciliation between church and state in Mozambique is part of a similar, wider trend in what was once called "Portuguese Africa." The other lands are Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau and São Tomé e Príncipe.

Trying to Stamp Out the Faith

The leaders of these young countries apparently realized that their Eastern bloc training was out of step with Africa's deeply held spirituality.



The New York Times/James Brooke

Parishioners lingering outside Our Lady of Victory Church in Maputo, Mozambique, after Mass.

In post-independence Mozambique, religious repression was so intense that some Americans say it moved them to support a rebel group here, the Mozambican National Resistance, or Renamo.

"Churches were completely boarded up," Thomas W. Schaaf Jr., a lobbyist for Renamo in Washington, said recently, recalling visits he made to remote villages in western Mozambique in the early 1980's. "Some were used as stables."

The Church of Fascism?

Immediately after independence, the Catholic Church was attacked as an arm of the Portuguese colonial regime and as the faith of the 250,000 Portuguese settlers here.

"The Catholic Church was the church of the colonial fascist regime," Mozambique's first President, Samora Machel, said at a meeting with religious leaders in 1982.

In a 20th-century version of Latin America's colonization by the cross and the sword, the Catholic Church in Portuguese Africa received a series of privileges denied other faiths: cathedral Masses broadcast on radio, free circulation of newspapers, and state salaries for missionaries, bishops and archbishops.

Opposed to independence, the church hierarchy here went so far as

to condemn a meeting in 1970 between Pope Paul VI and leaders of Angolan, Guinean and Mozambican independence movements.

On taking power, Mozambique's independence movement, Frelimo, nationalized all schools, hospitals and missions. Poorly controlled, this anti-clerical campaign often led to local abuses — closing of churches, silencing of church bells, travel bans on priests and discrimination against Christians in employment.

"Some churches were turned into cultural centers or schools," said Avelino Milioto, a catechist at Our Lady of Victory. "Our seminary was taken away and turned into a teachers' college."

Other faiths also suffered. Mozambique's Moslems, who account for 30 percent of the population of 14 million, encountered local bans on Moslem education, on the wearing of Moslem caps in public and on the call to prayer from minarets.

A Place to Find Strength

But despite official disfavor, the churches and mosques started filling up again in the early 1980's. Some people sense that the change sprang from Mozambique's economic collapse and seemingly endless civil war.

"People are finding strength in the

church," said the Rev. Robert Rowley, an American who is an assistant Methodist pastor here. "It brings a sense of security, when there is no security."

An estimated 50 fundamentalist sects have sprung up, and there is a flowering of prayer meetings in private houses.

Pilgrims to Mecca

"It's not really something for the police," said Job Chambal, director of religious affairs at the Justice Ministry. "It's something for the neighborhood leader, and often it's his own church so he looks the other way."

The Moslems have reopened mosques and religious schools and have sent pilgrims to Mecca.

Last year, 2,000 Jehovah's Witnesses, who had been deported to remote areas in 1976, were allowed to return home.

During Easter week, the Government-owned newspaper Noticias published photographs of churches filled with parishioners.

"At Eastertime I was confessing many, many men," a French priest recounted. "I asked many of them, when was your last confession? They said, before independence."