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From Asturias to Kinshasa: the work of a dentist in Congo

Dr. Ignacio Martínez, a stomatologist, who lives in Oviedo and has his practice in Avilés, has been collaborating with Monkole Hospital in Kinshasa, capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, since August 2016. He usually stays in Kinshasa for a month, during his holiday leave, to do a social work that has been awarded by the Asturias Dentists Association.

06/22/2023

It all started when you knew about Monkole Hospital...

Yes. Monkole is a health center located in the outskirts of Kinshasa in an area with a large population that would have no other means of receiving quality medicine.

Monkole's vocation is clearly one of solidarity. The hospital began (as a proposal from?) after Bishop Alvaro del Portillo's visit to Congo in 1989. More than 135,000 consultations are carried out every year. It has 158 beds.

You have recently been awarded the Francisco Martínez Castrillo Award 2022, granted by the Asturias Dentists Association, for your selfless participation in the implementation of the oral health

unit in Monkole. How did you receive this news?

With great joy, because I see it as an opportunity to make the project known to more people, and thus be able to reach many more needy people.

What is the origin of your desire to help others?

I owe the joy of being a Christian to my parents. Loving one's neighbour is an essential aspect of Jesus' message. Pope Francis has encouraged all Catholics to fight poverty and help the neediest persons.

From my childhood, I wanted to be a doctor. My great-grandfather and my grandfather were doctors. I got to know that besides being professionally competent, they provided a loving and affectionate service to the neediest. I remember

my grandfather Mario, who was a great ophthalmologist, how he asked blind people in the street if they could see the light. It was a time in Spain when not everyone had access to health care. He operated on many of these people free of charge.

I think one is a better doctor if he is a good person. I like building relationships with those who are near me. I have practiced general medicine for ten years. The relationships I have with so many sick people, often with calls to go to their homes, brings you closer to them.

I now practice stomatology. As a dentist I am still in close contact with patients and I try to alleviate and prevent mouth diseases. When I met Opus Dei, I learned that work should be a service. St. Josemaría used to say that “in order to be useful, serve.” This means that you have to acquire

good training so as to provide good professional care, not forgetting that we are helping people.

What is the social and health situation in Africa?

Africa is a big continent. Some countries are very different from others. Unfortunately, in many places people don't have the basic things needed to have a dignified life. Wars, sometimes tolerated or promoted by other countries, hinder their development.

There is also a lack of education, health care and no recognition of the work women do in society. Economic difficulties prevent many people, especially girls, from receiving professional training.

That is why I collaborate with the Harambee association, which was born during the canonization of St. Josemaría Escrivá, that tries to help

Africans be the protagonists of their own progress.

How did your interest in Africa begin?

A few years ago, in 2011, a patient asked me to collaborate with Monkole. I found out that there were no dentistry or maxillofacial services there. I decided, together with several colleagues and friends of mine, to offer these services to people who had no chance of getting dental treatment. We organized courses to finance those treatments. The Asturias Dentists Association and other entities have also generously collaborated. In 2015 the Dental Clinic within Monkole Hospital itself started.

Why did you venture into this work?

I think that we should all be responsible people and give back to

society as much as we receive from it. Those of us who have been fortunate enough to be trained in a profession have a duty to put it at the service of others.

What does your work entail?

We look after many patients with the help of local dentists. We do extractions, fillings, root canals, prostheses and small surgical procedures. We also go to some suburbs to do check-ups and give prevention talks. We also went to the *Pediatrie de Kimbondo*, a homeless center for children.

Since on-going education is important, we give lectures on oral pathology. Since 2019, we have been organizing scientific conferences. In 2022 we held a Congress, *Odontologie aujourd'hui*, perhaps the first international congress on implants, with more than 80 local dentists attending, very keen on learning. It

was broadcast online to dentists from Kenya, Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Congo Brazzaville, Mali, and also Italy, Argentina and Spain. I am very grateful to my colleagues who had very good presentations; the participants were very happy to benefit from such a high level of training.

Was it worthwhile for you to embark on this task?

This work is very rewarding. I have personally experienced that you receive much more than what you give.

What are the people of Congo like and what is their situation?

The people I interact with are very kind and grateful. I have also been struck by their patience and smiles. The Democratic Republic of Congo is a young country, with a lot of life and

an extraordinary development potential. They need infrastructure and above all stability.

What is your advice to those who want to volunteer?

To be enthusiastic about helping people with few resources. Not getting discouraged. Although we are not going to change the situation much, we can help those we will meet. It is also useful that one improves or learns French.

Dentistry in Congo does not yet have the resources we are used to. There are already years of experience about volunteering. The *Friends of Monkole Foundation* helps in the organization of the trip and stay. Those who want to cooperate and cannot go can help in many ways from their places.

What are you doing in this respect from Asturias?

Many professional colleagues have donated materials and dedicated time to the project: Alfredo, Berto, Germán, Ramón, Isabel, Ruth, Salvador, Silverio, Isidoro, Santiago, Gonzalo. Dental products companies such as my friend Sergio's, have also contributed. And many of my patients collaborate in the project.

What are your current plans?

To train local teams which will be able, with the appropriate means and training, to carry out surgical operations. Other projects are the establishment of a *School of Dental Hygienists and Dental Technicians*, which would allow many people to rehabilitate their mouths with the help of prostheses.

We want the Monkole Clinic to be able to offer dental and surgical treatments with the same quality we offer to the patients who come to our surgery.

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(03/30/2025)