

## Do you love me?



I was still a young girl of 18 and I wasn't too interested in prayer. I liked to go out; I liked everything but praying. One day my parents said that we were to go on holiday in the mountains in France. After the holidays, I had a very strong and unique experience: the Lord called me, one night. He called me, and made me understand who He was, I saw what my life was going to follow. In a dream I saw crippled people, I didn't understand anything at that moment because I was young and prayer didn't interest me at all. I heard a voice saying: Agnès, Agnès... do you love me? Do you love me...? It sounded far away like an echo. I saw a group of poor, crippled, sad people, people who called me; that and the first voice that repeated Agnès, do you love me? It repeated itself twice. The next day I asked my sister who was with me that night if she had seen or heard anything, and she said 'no'. My room was lit up.

When I came home I wondered if the Lord had really called me, I had the idea of getting married, nothing else. But I went to see a priest and I shared with him what I had seen in my dream and he told me: "Yes, I believe that the Lord is calling you". I, who had not had the idea of becoming a nun, started the fight. The priest told me that I had to go back to the word that the Lord had spoken to me. I had to go through all this again in peace and trust. Then I entered into grace. It was hard because even though I had already received it, I didn't want to, but little by little I understood. My brother, a White Father who was on mission wrote me a letter because I had shared with him: "I think the Lord is calling me but I believe these are just ideas, it is nothing at all". Then in his letter he said to me: "Agnès, if you believe that it is the good God, answer yes, come and see here, there is work for the laity and as you love lepers and the sick, come and see, you will have work." So, after that I packed my bags very quickly and I left and went to the Ladies of Mary who welcomed me as a young girl in Busiga (Burundi). That's how I saw the lepers, the misery, and little by little it was coming true and I asked myself: is this really it? It was a beautiful journey but full of questions.

After a year I returned to Belgium and joined the DMJ. After formation I was sent to Africa as a Sister. I was appointed to work among the lepers. I touched the wounds because at that time we were on our knees and we touched them without gloves. Ugly feet, full of stink, etc.... When I touched them the words came back: "Do you love me? »... Every time I touched them, instead of being terrified, I felt like I was touching grace... Something wonderful. I understood St. Paul, all the saints, and I understood in a short time what I thought I would never understand. Now I understand even more by sharing it, by praying I see that I have touched like the saints... I have touched the heart of God... the wound of man... It is an experience that burns me, that transforms me, that purifies me, that tears me apart. As I look back on this experience, something extraordinary still opens up in me. I really touched the wounded heart of God by touching the

Barundi lepers. I didn't understand what I was doing at that moment when I had stink on my hands.

I had several experiences of God, not only this one; a God of love, I experienced being shaped by the hand of God because when I was young, I had never thought of becoming a nun. The DMJ were great when they welcomed me as a young girl. I felt at ease during the three years I lived and worked with them. Marie Godelieve was wonderful; she was very open, pleasant, and so was Vianney. The whole community was kind in welcoming the young girls. There were three of us. I was for health care, in social and medical work and the other two were teachers. When the Lord works on you, he takes you, kneads you, and moulds you as the Bible says in Psalm 138, in Jeremiah 18:6... It is incredible how the Lord made me change direction. My ideas of getting married disappeared little by little and I no longer thought about it. The poor and all that misery I touched had occupied all my heart. I had to obey like a little child with no questions. Yet there was something to be afraid of: those lepers with deformed faces, ugly wounds; but I obeyed my heart because every time I looked at a face, the phrase " *Do you love me* " came back into my mind. What was important to me was to touch the suffering. It was an extraordinary experience to go to the depths of suffering; this has remained like a seal on my heart. I experienced very strong feelings in this call and I am grateful.

After this strong experience with lepers, I worked in a health centre. Afterwards I was offered to take care of someone with disability, Melanie, and little by little it was a group of children with disability affected by polio. There were twelve of them. Because I was not trained for that, I went back to Belgium to follow a training course in physiotherapy. Afterwards I learned that in Paris there was a doctor who was willing to receive me and train me in physiotherapy. There I had a complete and intensive training for casts, fitting, rehabilitation, and I was able to do an internship in the different departments. I went back to Burundi well trained and I was able to get the adequate equipment to establish a centre for these handicapped children.

The time came for me to return to Belgium, I felt ready, I was grateful for this beautiful experience I had had. The people I met brought me a lot, spiritually and morally. They taught me many things about life: love, obedience and simplicity. It was unimaginable what the poor taught me. I received a lot from these beautiful people during the 33 years I lived in Burundi. I would say like Saint Vincent de Paul who said: "It was the poor who evangelized me". The handicapped people evangelized me. When I speak of Burundi it is life, suffering, joy, sunshine, grief, and war. However, it was all a big wonderful package. Sometimes I wonder what I brought them. They gave me everything; they taught me love, forgiveness, tenderness, humility, welcoming, vision and the gift of themselves - you would see someone arrive bringing 4 or 5 eggs, or a bunch of bananas to say thank you. I learnt to see things clearly: the prayer, everywhere there was "Imana" (God). Now when I look back, I see that I had been very far from all this, they helped me to pray, to live, to obey, and to be kind.

I remember one evening when my car broke down, and I was scared. People from the surrounding area came; first the women and then the men who asked me what had happened.

Then I heard them exclaim: hey, it's our mother, the one who looks after our children. Others arrived: one brought water to drink, others brought a small banana. And now, far from being alone on this road with a broken-down car, I had a whole village around me; I was speechless. People who already have nothing but find something to give! I was touched by the thirst for God that I saw in people. Sometimes I accompanied the priest who was going to villages to celebrate Mass. It was incredible the crowds that were waiting.

This opportunity to be able to revisit is very important for me because I return to the source of my call and I see it again in all its richness. It means that a vocation is never finished, there is always the beginning that comes back. This phrase: "*Do you love me?*" has accompanied me a lot until today. I would say that the first call is never finished.

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