

You will be a missionary



When I was a student, there was a missionary week and a priest came to speak to the students at the big hall in Uccle. I remember I was at the last pew. He spoke about the missions and I thought that what he was saying did not concern me. Soon afterwards, I went to Mass in the morning and suddenly, after communion, I heard a voice: "You will be a missionary!" I was very happy! I went back home, I looked in the mirror and I made a serious face because I thought everyone would see that something had happened to me: a bit like Moses when he came down from Tabor! I didn't have to discern; I knew that this voice hadn't deceived me.

When I entered the Ladies of Mary (DMJ), the postulancy was in Uccle and the novitiate in Louvain. It was strict; one spoke only after having received permission, which one asked for by "Hail Mary". It did not bother me much except that often during the day I felt like laughing. So it was during the night that all the laughter that I had repressed came out; the others told me that as soon as I fell asleep, I would laugh out loud!

After formation in Uccle and then in Louvain, I left for Burundi. We were still in uniform at the time. In Bujumbura there was Janine who was called Véronique Marie, she was the headmistress of the Lycée Clarté Notre Dame de Vugizo, there was also Marie-José (Pauline) and Marthe who was called Marie Alphonse and was the sister of Simone and Madeleine Vandensteene. Marthe had been my teacher in eighth grade. I was part of this community and I taught at the Lycée for 4 years. Before that, I had had an idea of what missionary life was like: an expedition, in the bush, etc., but I felt that I was not made for extraordinary things; I had said to the Lord: "I won't be able to do all that it takes, but since you are asking me, I suppose that you will do it for me, you will "manage" "and that is how I got involved.

In 1960, when I arrived in Bujumbura, it was the time of the earthquakes, there is even a wall of a facade of the high school that fell. As there were a few days left before the beginning of the school year, I was sent to Busiga in the meantime. Sometimes we could hear and feel earthquakes while we were eating. It didn't scare me very much but Yvonne who was in the community was so afraid that she would spontaneously jump out as soon as she felt the shakes, even during the night. We slept in a kind of dormitory but with small rooms separated by a small partition. I, who had just arrived, wondered why she went out every time. I guessed that maybe it was serious and that it was necessary to do it like that. So, I sat down on the edge of my bed, put on my sandals and I said to myself: "The next time there's a jolt, I'm going out behind Yvonne. "I waited ... then I fell asleep, and the next morning I woke up feeling something at my feet: I had slept with my sandals on so I started laughing!

After my 4 years in Bujumbura, I was sent to Busiga, then to Kanyinya and finally to Kiremba. During the troubled times of 1972 I was headmistress in Kanyinya.

When it was necessary to change the Constitutions of the Bene Mariya in the 1980s, I was one of the group of three who were going to work on them: Sr Emmanuelle who was Superior General of the B.M. at that time, Father Boedts and I; we worked together and the communion between us was strong because we did everything in prayer. It was a time of grace.

When, around 1977, the persecution of the Church had begun and Christians were being put in prison, I was no longer the principal in the school; I asked the principal if I could continue to give the religion course and he told me: "They didn't tell me that you couldn't"; it was an ambiguous way of saying and I took it as a "yes" and I organized my religion courses but not in the school. I called for volunteers and we went to a small room in the parish. It was a special class because I spoke and the students did not say a word. Even though they had come as volunteers, they did not dare to assert themselves, they were afraid of each other. Later everything was forbidden and the churches had to close; sisters could only celebrate in the church centers and give communion. Priests and Christians were imprisoned, catechists could no longer say anything. Expulsions of the missionaries followed. Then they were no longer called "expulsions" because it made a lot of noise at the international level, but it was called "authorization to leave definitively"; visas were no longer renewed. The first to leave was Jeanne Devedec who was in Bururi because that's where the departures began, then Monique Boils and others followed. I was among the last to leave. Our apostolates had to be ceded to the diocese; basically we did not really have any properties except for Kanyinya and the house in Bujumbura. We handed over everything to the diocese and asked if Kanyinya could pass to the Bene Maria and Gisanze to the Bene Bikira; we had asked the Bene Maria to occupy the house in Bujumbura.

In the meantime, we were wondering what was going to follow and we were exploring possibilities of opening another mission elsewhere. It was at this time that Bernadette's cousin Monsignor Philippe Stevens, who was bishop in northern Cameroon, asked if we could open a community in his diocese of Maroua-Mokolo. Bernadette, who was provincial of Burundi at that time, went on an exploration trip to northern Cameroon with Sr. Anne Marie. And then I was asked to go to Cameroon with Geneviève Goris to start at Mémé. It was a year of discernment for me because I was wondering how I would survive the heat of Mémé! There were some things that attracted me: especially the simplicity of life, but the climate made me wonder. So I said to myself that if God called me there, he would help me to adapt.

I spent a year of reflection in Belgium before going to Cameroon because I didn't really know what kind of apostolate I was going to do. Sometimes I would wake up at night thinking about this departure to Cameroon and I would start to cry.

Finally, advised by Sister Marie-Godelieve, I went to see a priest who was a great man of discernment, to share with him what I felt about this change of mission. I told him that the

leaders had asked me to go to the North of Cameroon and that if that was what the Lord was asking me to do, I was ready to go. He listened to me and answered me with a question: "What if the Lord did not ask you that? What if that's not what he wanted?" oh! What joy! In a flash I felt that this was not what the Lord was asking me. "Thank you Father, I understood" And I left... The meeting hadn't lasted 10 minutes! I then wrote to Bernadette to share with her this light that the Lord had given me. She replied that I did not have to go to Cameroon...

In fact, shortly afterwards, Bernadette was appointed to the general team and I had to replace her as Provincial in Burundi. That was in 1975. Soon the time of expulsions would begin. Then, in 1987 we returned to Burundi after the coup d'etat of '86.

Soon we began to think again about welcoming postulants in Burundi while the novitiate was in Uganda.

Later, when the exchange of postulants for language learning began, I took care of the postulants who came from Uganda to learn French; I loved being with the young people.

When I realized it was time to leave Burundi, it wasn't too hard for me. I had started to think about my future because I could see that I was getting older; I had already dropped some of my classes. When I consulted the ophthalmologist for my eye problem, he told me that my illness could not be treated in Burundi and immediately I understood that my time had come and in one week I prepared my return to Belgium. When I arrived, I didn't know where I was going to live. That was difficult, but I went on a retreat and after the retreat everything was clear to me, I heard the words: "Leave and go, I will do with you every step of the way".

Today I regret nothing, I was happy in Burundi and I am happy here in Brussels. The Lord responds when we call him. Remain attached to Jesus Christ and keep joy, trust, courage as our Founder tells us. Keep the desire to reach out to the most needy and do it concretely if there is a way; keep it simple.

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