

Memories from Christine Ntibarutaye.

I joined the Daughter of Mary and Joseph in 1984 in Kanyinya where the DMJ Burundi opened the Noviciate. In 1986, the Church in Burundi was persecuted, whereby all the missionaries had to leave the country - even by force. The question for the DMJ in Burundi was what next for these novices? We were three novices, one Rwandese, and two Burundians. The Rwandese left the Congregation and the two of us, Renee Butoyi and I, were ready to join the Noviciate in Uganda. But how to reach there was also a question. Nobody of our sisters could go out of the country and come back. If you left the country at that time you were barred from re-entering. Michele Collignon who was in charge of us sent a telegram to Helen Lane who was at that time, the Provincial of Uganda to come to the Burundi border to collect us. Michelle was sure that Helen would have got the message. So we were told to go to say good bye to our families as we didn't know when we could meet them again, since the situation of the war was becoming very bad.

We had our two weeks with our families and came back to pack our things in order to leave the country. On the 26th October 1984, we left Burundi in tears and Michelle drove us to the Burundi border to meet Helen who, in fact, did not turn up. We waited for the whole day, no Helen and at the end of the day we came back. My sadness turned to joy as we were coming back to the Country, because I was telling to myself, I would never see again my family. At that time, the communication was difficult. The only way of communicating was through the telegram and you had to go to Bujumbura to send it. So as there was no communication from Uganda, after two days on the 28th October, Michelle decided again to drive us to the Border, hoping maybe to see Helen arriving. Once again there was no sign of Helen. Michelle's worry was that if we didn't leave the country before the rest of the sisters were forced to leave we would never get a chance to join the Noviciate in Uganda. She said, 'I am going to risk driving you to Kigali and I will leave you with the Jesuits'. She did not have any paper to cross the borders so she asked the police who were at the border to allow her to drive us to Kigali and come back the same day. I think after a long discussion with the police they allowed her to cross the borders under certain conditions. So she drove us to Kigali and handed us to one of the Jesuits whom she knew very well. And she asked him to help us to reach Uganda. Michelle left us and went back to Burundi. This time, we were concerned about Michelle going back alone. But we trusted that our Mother Mary and St Joseph were going to protect her.

The following day, the Father took us to the immigration to look for a visa to go to Uganda. People in the office were very nice to us, showing us how to fill the forms, because the forms were in English and we were used to the French. After getting the visa, the following day the Jesuits gave us a vehicle and driver to take us to Rwanda and Uganda borders. Everything went well at the two borders and everybody was sympathising with us as they were aware of Burundi situation.

Reaching the Uganda side, what next? We didn't know where to go. Michelle had given us all the addresses of the DMJ houses in Uganda. We said to each other, 'let us try the nearest' and this was Kabale. We took a special hire taxi from the border, which cost a lot of money according to the ones who knew the prices. The taxi man told us that he knew the DMJ but finally we discovered this wasn't true. He just drove us to Rushoroza hill in Kabale and we had to find out which house ourselves. We tried two convents and the sisters would tell us, 'we are not DMJ'. We tried a third one and this was the right one.

I rang the bell and there comes a DMJ: Liz McCarthy and I recognised the medal. I said 'Good morning sister, I am Christine, I come from Burundi'. And the sister started to say, 'Oh my goodness, what's happened to you? We were expecting you in two weeks' time'. She continued, saying "Oh my goodness ". And luckily enough, she started to talk to me in French. And for me I was so happy to have found a DMJ house. I said 'Now let me go to tell the one I came with that it is the right house and pay the taxi man.' We took our suitcases in the house, and Liz asked us 'How much did you pay?' I said '10 dollars' and she said 'that is a lot of money you gave', I said 'Sister, we don't know the price but thank God we are safe'. So in the community, there was, this young looking girl called Anastazia, who was a postulant at that time, and she was looking at us with the eyes full of compassion but no way to communicate. There was also Anatolia. The communication became very tough. For me I knew how to say 'Good morning, I am Christine from Burundi' and full stop. Liz started to talk to everybody in French, telling Anastazia to prepare a cup of tea for us. And since Anastazia didn't understand what Liz was saying, she kept looking at us. But for us we were waiting for this cup of tea which never came. And at the end Liz noticed that we were not given a cup of tea and started to shout at Anastazia and Anastazia said that she did not understand the language she used.

Liz asked us if we wanted to go to the Provincial house, and we said 'We don't even know where the Provincial house is; now we are in your hands do whatever you want with us. For us we are happy that we have found DMJ.' So she gave us a room in the annexe. And during the night, we felt insects falling on our beds and starting to bite us and these were red ants. We could not sleep, the whole night we were chasing these ants. And in that room, there was no electricity, we used the lantern.

And we were scared to go out since it was our first time in Uganda. Outside it was very dark, we could not go out. We started to say, 'God what is this? You brought us safely to the DMJ and now we are eaten by the ants.' We were happy to see the night over.

In the morning Liz asked us if we slept well, we said 'No'. We told her the story of the ants and she said 'Why you did you not come to tell me that you have a problem.' We said, 'Do you think that we knew where to find you?' So she told us to move to the community house. The following night, we had a very good sleep.

After two days in Kabale community, we were brought in Mbarara to the Provincial house, where we met Helen coming from Kampala to meet us at the border. She found us in her house. There were a lot of emotions in the house to see us arriving in such situation. But what we found difficult in the Provincial house was a very tough dog called “Kwinsi”. He could not smell us; he would just come to attack us. Thank God Diane was there and came to our rescue. Because we were scared of this dog, we kept saying that we would like to go to join the Noviciate in Ibanda but unfortunately, the Noviciate was being renovated and we had to wait for at least two weeks. We waited until the Noviciate was ready to accommodate us.

I would like to thank each and every one who built me up from the day I expressed my desire to join the DMJ up to now. Some have gone to God. May they be rewarded continuously. Blessings, Blessings, blessings to each one of you.

Christine Ntibarutaye

