

## MY JOURNEY WITH POSTULANTS AND NOVICES FROM UGANDA TO CAMEROON VIA GHANA AND IVORY COAST

It may seem a strange journey that one may move from Uganda to Cameroon through Ghana, but at one point in the life of our formation adventure it happened. Nevertheless, it was an experience that left a mark of growth for those who went through it. The following is the experience of our journey.

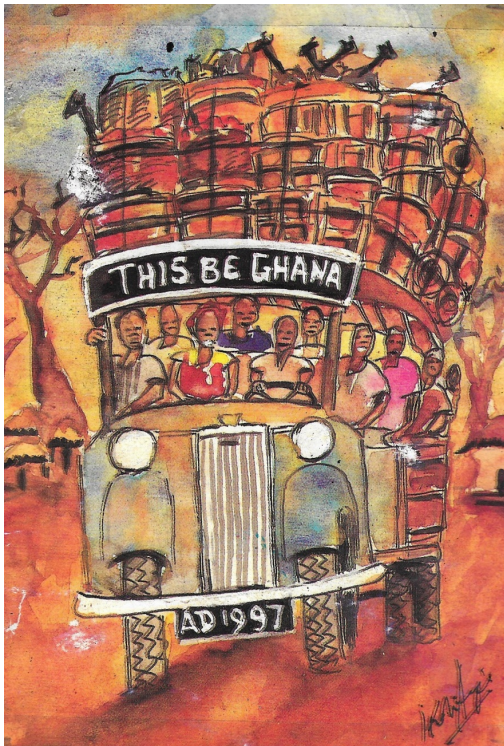
It was 6th September 2003 when I set off from Uganda to Cameroon with a group of four postulants and seven novices. Priscilla, Sarah, Evelyn, and Scovia were the postulants, while the novices were Alice, Eleonore, Credonia, Rosette, Lucy, Edith, and Fauster. (Since then Evelyn, Scovia, Edith, and Credonia have left the Congregation). The trip started from Mbarara, a familiar ground for those who were moving out for their first time. It was not an easy start because many of the sisters were emotional and tearful, but we had to go and to be detached from our loved ones for the sake of the mission!

After our goodbyes, we set off from Mbarara to Kampala where we spent a night and the following day we took a plane from Entebbe Airport, through Nairobi to Accra where we found Sr. Patricia (Pat) and Br. Bruno (A Franciscan Brother) waiting for us with a mini-bus. The noise and excitement from the novices and postulants when they saw Pat was thunderous! We packed our luggage in the mini-bus and squeezed ourselves in whatever space was not occupied by our luggage!

We left Accra Airport, drove to Cape Coast in the heat and humidity, a climatic experience that was different from that of East Africa, but there was no complaint. We arrived at our community at Ahotokurom Centre. Our rooms were ready. After refreshing ourselves, we ate and each of us

dropped into bed with a sigh of relief after a long journey. We spent a month in Ghana where we had a wonderful time with Pat and the entire community of Ahotokurom. Both novices and postulants had a very good experience in Ghana. They enjoyed swimming in the ocean. None of them had ever seen the Ocean or touched a leper. It was in Ghana that they had a chance to do so. This was a great and educative experience.

After that enriching experience in Ghana, it was time for us to resume our journey. This journey would take us through Ivory Coast where we would process our visas for Cameroon. Margaret Eason who was then a member of the General Team and had come to visit Ahotokurom community, together with Pat, accompanied us to Takoradi, a place where we would meet our bus coming



from Accra going to Ivory Coast. We were supposed to leave Ghana at 8.00 in the morning but the bus did not arrive till the afternoon. We said goodbye to Pat and Margaret, packed our luggage and left Ghana for Ivory Coast.

When we arrived at the border, the mood changed, there was tension among the people around us. The soldiers and the immigration officers were harsh, nervous and tough towards us. They thought that we did not have visas for Ivory Coast. Fortunately each one of us had the visa.

After checking through at the Immigration, we boarded our bus and continued our journey towards the Abidjan, the Capital City of Ivory Coast. However, we only traveled for a short distance and suddenly the bus stopped in the middle of the forest. We had no idea why it had stopped and there was no explanation given to us either by the driver or the bus-conductor. We sat in the bus wondering what had happened and what would happen to us since it was already getting dark. Later on, we learnt that the country was at war and the army would not allow us to continue our journey in case we met the enemy. We were told that we were at the front-line and in that case, we had to be protected from the rebels! The soldiers surrounded our bus and throughout the night they were coming in the bus to check our passports. We were the only people who were being checked, the other passengers were from Ghana and they did not need visa to go to Ivory Coast. We prayed more than ever and God heard our prayers. He protected us from harm and harassment from the soldiers! We spent the night in the bus and towards the morning we were told that we would leave at 6.00 am. However, we did not leave the forest till 10.00 am. We were very hungry. Our last meal was the breakfast we ate in the morning before we started our journey. Some of the people on the bus told Sarah and Evelyn that there was a place where they could buy food. I gave them my blessing and told them to be careful! They walked a short distance and true enough, the food was there. They ordered rice and some sauce to mix with it. In a short time their order was brought and they were ready to eat. One of them took a spoonful but could not swallow because the food was full of (piripiri) hot peppers. She spat everything out of her mouth and wiped tears from her eyes. They then decided to eat rice alone without sauce. Eventually, we all had to go to that place and order rice alone.

After our meal, we resumed our journey and the bus drove towards the Capital City. On our way to the city, we encountered very many road-blocks and every time we had to go out to have our passports checked. I made sure that everybody was checked and I was always the last to leave the road-block in case one from the group would be snatched away! At around 2.00 pm, we arrived at the Procure where we had our accommodation and where we would spend a week processing our visas. Fortunately, our rooms were ready but there was no food till the evening, lunch was over. You could imagine how we felt, we were hungry, thirsty and worn out.

I decided to go to town to search for food and I took Alice with me. The hand of God was always leading us on this journey. Because of war, there were very few people in the streets and we had no idea where we were going to get food. At long last we saw a hotel, we entered and the place seemed deserted. We stood in the entrance of the hotel asking ourselves what to do next and at

that moment a lady came from inside the hotel, she was going to the washroom. However, she put her needs aside and came towards us to find out what we wanted. We told her what we were looking for and why we were in Ivory Coast. We discovered that the lady was Rwandan who was working in Israel Embassy in Abidjan and she had worked with the United Nations in Burundi before she married. The lady's name was Constant. The first thing she did, she rang home to tell them to prepare food for us and within a short time, she drove us to her home where we collected food and took it to our starved sisters! They were overjoyed to see that we brought food!

Oh the hand of God at our service!! We were not only hungry for food and fed but we were also facilitated in the process of getting the visas. On our way back to where we were staying, Madam Constant called Cameroon Ambassador and asked him if he could give us visa to Cameroon the following day. We were told to be at the Embassy at 8.00 am the following day. We went to the Embassy the following morning as we had been told and we handed in our passports. The secretary told us to come back in the afternoon to collect our visas. At 2.00 pm, we returned to the Embassy and we found that our passports and visas were ready to be collected, we thanked the secretary and asked her to thank the Ambassador on our behalf and left the Embassy.

The following day, we went to the airport to confirm our flight. Reaching there, we found out that there were no flights to Cameroon because the plane which was supposed to fly to Yaounde had been grounded in France. For a week, every day we had to go to the Airport to check if there was any flight to Yaounde but in vain. One day, we went to the Airport as it was our routine, we were told that there was a flight to Yaounde and they could only take six of us that evening and the other six would go the following day. It was hard for me to decide who would go first and who would stay behind. As a group, we discussed the issue and we came to conclusion that I would go first with postulants up to Douala and from Douala, I would put the four postulants on the bus to Yaounde where they would meet Anna Mary and Theresa and I would then stay in Douala to wait for the second group. It was very hard for me to accept that decision but there was no other alternative, I had to go with the first group. Before I went, I asked the priest who was in charge of our accommodation to accompany the novices to the Airport and he agreed. Because Alice and Eleonore were French speakers, I asked them to be in charge of the novices. I left enough money with each novice in case the war became serious and they had to run away from Ivory Coast. I left the Airport with a heavy heart; I was praying that nothing would happen to the novices.

Our journey to Douala, Cameroon, was quiet and sad. We arrived in the evening, and we spent the night at the Airport. Early in the morning, I put the postulants on the Yaounde bus. I had already communicated with Theresa to meet them on the bus; I stayed in Douala to wait for the novices. At midday I went to look for something to eat and it was at that moment Alice called from Ivory Coast and told me that they were on their way to the Airport and the priest was with them. I was delighted to hear that and I was also hopeful that they would arrive that evening. I spent the whole day at the airport walking up and down. Around mid-night, they announced that the flight from Ivory Coast had arrived. My joy was mixed with apprehension. I was not sure if

all of them were on that flight. Suddenly I saw Lucy standing, she was also looking for me and her height saved me! I called out her name and she saw me then and told the others who in turn started calling out my name. It was at that moment the policeman who might have thought that we were out of our minds allowed me to go where they were collecting their luggage. Our reunion was so joyful that we thanked God who had brought everybody safely. We all felt happy and relieved. After such a joy, we had to find a place at the airport where we could sit. We found chairs in one of the corners but they were full of bedbugs. Since it was the only place we could get, we stayed there for the whole night and the bedbugs feasted on us, nobody slept! The following morning at 6.00 am, we took a bus to Yaounde, Cameroon and the whole journey took 3 hours. Our arrival at home was full of joy and excitement. We had a very big welcome and excellent meal! Novices were given a week to rest before starting their course.

What we went through was not easy but the joy we experienced after our journey was greater than what we suffered. I believe that true joy comes from suffering! This is one of my two trips I made to accompany the novices from Uganda to Cameroon via Ghana and Ivory Coast. I hope this story will help you to know and to understand the risks we took and what we experienced on our journey of faith!

Enjoy the reading and be blessed!

Sr. Donatilla Nyirarwanga DMJ

Nairobi, Kenya

