

## The Red Thread.

'I will sing forever of the love of the Lord.' Ps 88.

### **Introduction:**

Helen Lane asked me to write a memoir. That seemed to me to be contrary to the eremitical life. However, she gave this reason for the request: 'It is the first time in our congregation that a sister asked to become a hermit, while at the same time remaining a full part of the congregation.'

In responding I was slow to accept this invitation, partly because I wasn't used to speaking about or sharing what is at the heart of this call and secondly because I find it difficult to summarise the significant steps along the ways which grew and developed both in my family and in the congregation. The Lord's call evolved, matured and became clear in the ordinary events in the heart of the congregation and in the different services and encounters experienced over the course of the years. I wasn't born a hermit but all of my past life somehow contained a thread and a path that led towards a 'communion in prayer with all people on earth' or simply 'all people became ONE within me and in my prayer.'

### **Childhood: (in the bathtub of the Dames de Marie).**

My grandparents lived near the school of the Dames de Marie, Chaussée d'Haecht and my grandfather helped in painting the school buildings! That was where my mother and her sister, Alice, attended school along with numerous cousins! However, after my parents married they moved to Uccle, close to the Dames de Marie, Rue Edith Cavell. After our kindergarten Jacqueline, Lily (Alice), Pierre and myself were prepared for our First Holy Communion by Mother Marie Denise who had spent all her religious life in that little paradise- the kindergarten. The three girls of the family continued their primary school studies (during the war years 1940-45) and some of their secondary studies in the same school, filled with the spirit of Constant William Van Crombrughe whose bust was in the great hall surveying all.

In 6<sup>th</sup> class of Primary school Marie Vianney spoke passionately and enthusiastically to us of the desire to proclaim the Gospel in Burundi. She was impatiently awaiting the opportunity to go. (We found ourselves together in Busiga 12 years later!).

In the 4<sup>th</sup> year 'Moderne' Marie Alphonse, who had two other sisters in the Dames de Marie (Madeline and Simone) spoke openly to us of religious life as a total gift of oneself to Jesus. The link/connection was quickly made in myself: to become a religious equalled becoming a missionary. That was the conclusion of an innocent! We had experienced during those years (especially at the time of the sudden death of Papa) the goodness and compassion of our class mistresses.

At the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of secondary school I went to the 'Rue de Ligne' to the Ecole Normale of the Dames de Marie. I recall a 'desert' experience – a time of solitude, frustration and impatience. I then looked and searched elsewhere to let the seed mature. At Rosary Parish I was asked to take charge of the Benjamin group (later the JCF), a group of disadvantaged youth. Our meeting room was in the compound of the FCJ (Faithful Companions of Jesus) who had an educational section for

the poor. We used to call these sisters 'mysterious' because they didn't go out and they spoke very little French (they were all English).

Today we are all familiar with the Column of Congress where the name of our Founder is inscribed, as a member of the provisional government. The Ecole Normale was only a few steps from there. It was also very close to the 'Marolles', the poor quarter of the Rue Haute (today the oldest part of Brussels) It was here that the school asked us to visit certain old people who lived alone. There I encountered the unthinkable/unimaginable and this marked my life: the elderly couple whom I visited, lived at the bottom of a corridor, sitting around a small table. Their bedroom had only the very bare essentials. They were no longer able to walk. They had had 17 children and not one of them visited them. They were completely abandoned and dependent on the help of neighbours. I saw and heard at that time what is meant by poverty.

On the day of the presentation of diplomas at the Ecole Normale, in July 1956, I asked permission of my mother to enter the Dames de Marie- without ever before having spoken of my desire for religious and missionary life. Her response was simple. Weeping she said: 'Not immediately, I hope.' No. I taught at Uccle for 6 months and entered the Postulancy on February 2<sup>nd</sup> 1957 while continuing to teach for that year. I had the strong conviction that I would go to Africa.

In the Novitiate we were different nationalities- Irish, English, Burundi, Belgium. (This was the last group of novices to do their novitiate in Uccle: the following group went to Louvain). This gave me a desire to spread my wings and go- as they would soon do- heading for California, Africa and England. Through all this time of preparation Bernadette Marie would speak to us discreetly of Africa- her brother was a White Father in Rwanda and she was filled with a desire to go.

After our temporary vows which was on 11<sup>th</sup> August 1959 I went to Burundi. I travelled on September 8<sup>th</sup> 1959.

### **Burundi.**

Following my arrival in Busiga on 14<sup>th</sup> September I remained in that community until May 1975. It was a joy to discover our sisters and the teaching (profession) under the wing of Marie Vianney who was a zealous spokesperson for education. All of the Verandah listened to her voice and could follow her lesson from outside! As I had been given some free time to study Kirundi, I took the opportunity to approach the Batwa (Pygmies) at Ibuye Hill. At that time they were isolated from the other Barundi and had access to neither schools nor dispensaries. It was at this time also that we got permission to visit the prisoners at Ngozi. Those men and women, incarcerated, had the desire and the joy of learning to read and write. They had begun to write on their arms, then on the ground and finally on blackboards brought in from outside. What lessons in perseverance and hope!

Later Tereza McManus joined me and in '73 she continued those visits herself and later followed by Janine Mairiaux.

At that stage I also went every year to the Catechetical Centre of Butare (Rwanda) to teach the pedagogy of family and child catechesis. The students came from three different countries –Congo (Bukavu), Rwanda and Burundi. I don't know what they learnt but they became my teachers/coaches/masters in African customs.

At Busiga we were a big community. Marie Godelieve was provincial and she often went to visit the sisters. It was due to her that I learnt to drive a car , in the mud as well as in the hills. On two occasions we spent the whole night in the car before a closed barrier between Rwanda and Burundi. It rained torrentially and the ants in columns entered the car in order to be dry :that is sharing!!

Marie Beatrice who was the oldest of the community, often surprised us with her direct reflections. Judith (Marie Eulalie) came on a visit to Burundi having spent two weeks with the sisters in Brazil. She opened us up to the renewal of religious life (after Vatican 2)- the efforts at small Christian communities and sisters living alone/singly. Marie Beatrice exclaimed: 'We gather all sorts in the Dames de Marie'. No need to tell you the reaction of Judith!

Marie Cecile, whom the students loved dearly, but who no longer taught, given her age said one day: 'My heart is like an open garden.' The students called her 'the saint'. Her eyes mirrored the heavens and her heart was open to all.

Around 1964 I gave a Bible course to the Novitiate of the Bene Mariya and I particularly loved that- a thirst which has never left me. Later I had the joy of living with them during their year, preparing for their final vows. That was a unique experience living in community with the Barundi and learning from them the secrets of daily life, the family customs and discovering their deep religious sense.

In September 1971 I was freed to be at the service of the Burundi Province together with Michelle Collignon and Anne Marie de Brabandere. At that time we lived in 5 communities- Busiga, Ngozi, Kisanze, Kanyinya and the Lycee of Bujumbura.

In April 1972 the massacres started in Burundi- unforgettable months- etched forever in the hearts of those who lived them. We could only be a **Presence** to those who suffered and **pray** for the massacres to stop. Visits to the prison were forbidden and for a reason. A cloak of silence covered the country and a silent communion spread with the family of the disappeared.

Prayer became a communion of presence, a communion of faith in God who alone could change hearts. It was during these tragic months that the prayer of intercession took root deeply within me.

A certain calm returned. At the beginning of July the survivors began counting their dead and we saw and heard 'earth-shattering' Christian witness. For example: A teacher had given our sisters at Kisanze a small radio-cassette asking that it be hidden. The next day he disappeared. Later the sisters remember the cassette and listening to that disturbing song: 'Love one another as I have loved you.' What an evangelical witness of a Christian who forgave his tormentors before being killed. That song found a deep home in me. It had echoes of a little leaflet found in Papa's vest after his death in 1951. Along with the same phrase he added 'Love your enemies.' (He was a prisoner of war in Germany during the war years 1940-1945 and he returned physically broken).

As time went on, our relationship with the Barundi became more of a communion. We were no longer there to teach but to learn from them the Gospel of forgiveness, to participate in their suffering, their joy, their ,faith and their uncertain future. To become a 'useless servant' demanded

a lot of humility and each one responded in her own way, with the grace of the present moment. Jesus asks us to love 'as He loved us.'

The President of Burundi, Bagaza, threatened to expel the foreign missionaries. Our Province decided to 'anticipate the future.' Some of our sisters were open to responding to the Gospel call in other parts of Africa. I went to some of the West African countries with Anne Marie and Pere Comblin (White Father). (He was responsible for the African Fraternities). These were countries that we didn't know but from whom we had received 'discreet calls'. That journey truly opened our eye. We went, first to South Cameroon (home of the Pygmies) up to the extreme north the diocese of Maroua-Mokolo.

After that we set out for the Ivory Coast where Marie Jose Baranyanka taught in the Catechetical Centre of Abijan. It was there that Barbara Batten (who was on the General Team with Ruth and Simone) joined us- without its being pre-planned. She was coming from having visited the sisters in Ghana. She returned to Europe unwell and died two weeks after the Plenary in California.

With Marie Jose we visited projects that were established to work with the most disadvantaged. This was followed by a visit to Burkina Faso where the brother of Marie Therese Van Krunkelsven was expecting us.

We returned to Burundi with notebooks full of reflections, sharing, questions, expectations and of hope. That whole long research was drawn to a conclusion in Burundi.

During our Province gathering we discussed and chose a new presence in Africa, where we wanted to be close to the people. From that was born the mission of North Cameroon.

Holding all these experiences in my heart along with the suffering of the many people whom I knew, I was not favourably disposed to being part of the General Team (with Ruth and Maggy O') at the Chapter of 1975. I imagined it being said in Burundi: 'Why are you leaving while we are suffering here?'

The seed of another 'communion' was painfully born in me (in the midst of a struggle.) That was of the communion of universal prayer.

### **Rome.**

From 1975-1981 the Lord opened my heart and spirit to other realities in the world. (other global realities?) Partaking in the joys and sorrows of our sisters, visiting the different Provinces of the Congregation opened me up to different realities in life and to other countries in distress. It asked me to accept to be disturbed by the wounds that each one carried in herself and to take all this to prayer. My inner 'rebellion' was slowly transformed into openness to the signs of the presence of God "in everything and everyone"- as well as the thirst for the communion of all life-universal.

These years also invited me to discover other fragile faces and other situations of poverty in different countries. These became my new teachers which opened my heart and spirit to the compassionate Jesus. I read and re-read often the commentary of our Founder on the Sacred Heart of Jesus. It seemed to me that 'to see and to hear' with the heart of Jesus who has given up His life for all, is the ground of our charisms of Mercy and Compassion.

I recall with gratitude several encounters with the sisters and other witnesses to the Gospel which provided me with a light along the way.

### **Mexico.**

Sr Barbara Theresa lived beside the esplanade of the Cathedral of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The 12<sup>th</sup> December was the date on which the Indians came down from the mountains in their thousands in a veritable human 'march' to celebrate the Mother of the Poor. Praying and singing, they walked on their knees to the Basilica. In the midst of such a crowd I was tossed about, pushed and swept along and found myself in a way drawn to join them and walk with them on my knees. That made a unique impression on me as I felt ONE with them but it also made me aware of how difficult it is to be humble of heart and to 'lower' oneself in order to learn to meet the poor on one's knees and as Pope Francis later said: 'on ones tiptoes'.

### **Brazil.**

Margareta Malfliet lived alone as a DMJ in the Northeast of Brazil. She is still there at the height of the village of Poranga, a place of silence, of encounter and of prayer. Her persevering presence in the midst of the uncertainties of the north, her simple and enthusiastic communion with the group of 'suffering servants' made me think again of the zeal of which the founder spoke.

Don Fragozo (Bishop of the diocese of Crateus) believed fervently in the 'richness' of the poor. He struggled for justice to the point that a book (written on him) ended by him being hanged. The poor always disturb when one allows them to show us the way of life.

Another witness of the Diocese- Alfredino- Swiss and very short in stature was a priest who lived in the midst of the poorest Brazilians. He was so short that he needed a stool to stand on so that the Christians could see his head peeping up over the altar. He radiated humble love. For him there existed only one sin- injustice towards the poor, not to love as Jesus loved. He became for me a living icon. Finally I continue to hold in my heart the reflection of Bishop Dom Helder Camara whom we met at Recife: 'The more I have to work, the more I take time to pray'.

### **California.**

The visit with Sr Bridget Johnston to San Quentin Prison in California: the biggest prison which even today has 4000-5000 prisoners of whom 700 are in death row. Walking along those silent corridors where one could hear cries of despair- shattered me. It was another dimension of the prison experience which I never knew. Death Row- a place where mercy doesn't exist. I asked myself if sometimes, I don't place others in situations in which there is no hope ( death rows) by my hasty judgements, my certitudes, my condemnations, my impatience? Jesus has said to us: 'Love your enemies; love those who persecute you.'

### **Canada.**

Brenda lived with young people of different Christian denominations (not to mention her cat!). She gave herself completely to 'strangers' who had come to Canada and who spoke no English. (Chinese, Polish, Brazilians etc). I will never forget her desire to adapt courses in line with different cultures. She even went to China to 'hear' the Chinese and try to adapt her teaching of English. Always ready to learn from others and to meet them where they are, we found ourselves one day

sitting on the pavement, in the street! She had met a refugee and searched for a way to help him. After his departure she said to me: 'I should rush because I have a meeting with the Minister of the Interior: he ought to be au fait with what is happening'. She was at ease sitting by the roadside or at a minister's table (from the moment she could claim the rights of the impoverished.)

### **Rome.**

Returning to Rome- a place of rich encounter: Many people whom I meet became for me Gospel witness.

**Henri Nouwen**, a Dutch priest and writer, gave a seminar in the Gregorian in 1977 on the theme of compassion (from which emerged his book). Several sisters on sabbatical gained from those courses and from his theatrical presentation. It was as if he conveyed his message through bodily expression. He was on fire internally with his compassion for each person in distress.

### **Terry Waite.**

In 78 Ruth, Margaret O' and I prepared the English Plenary (to be held in UK) assisted by Terry Waite in the role of animator and inspirer. In the course of the preparation he was called by the Archbishop of Canterbury to mediate and conciliate for the release of those kidnapped in Lebanon. He left us immediately. On arriving there he himself was kidnapped and remained a prisoner there for four years at the mercy of his abductors. "There is no greater love than to give your life for those you love". Finally freed and broken he revealed his life as a victim of violence.

### **Mother Teresa of Calcutta.**

On her way through Rome Mother Teresa was invited to address an international gathering of Major Superiors. Very small in stature but with a heart that encompassed the whole world, she simply said to us: 'we try care for the poorest of the poor, those who live like animals on earth but who die like angels'. Then having finished she sat down silently. It was finished by a silence laden by suffused with the light of the Spirit which she radiated.

While Peg Rahilly was in Rome we had an opportunity to meet Jean Vanier (the founder of L'Arche). He shared with us his love, his respect and his humble approach to handicapped people (people with special needs). They reflect for us that which we are – fragile, limited, damaged by life or by circumstances. The handicapped reflect to us our closed soul/spirit towards those who seem different. For him, Vanier, the secret lies in the Beatitudes and opening one's eyes and heart to reflect the presence of Jesus in them. Happy the poor!

In August 1979 Ruth, Margaret O' and myself spent two months at Santa Maria, California. There we encountered Constant William Van Crombrughe. We had brought with us from Rome all the letters of the founder (more than 1000 letters) addressed to our sisters which had been deciphered and typed by Simone Vandesteene during the years 1974-5. It was through that prayerful reflection that we felt the charism emerge- the charism that was our congregational legacy, 'To be Instruments of Mercy in the Hand of God.' Later Teresa Clements did her doctoral thesis on our charism.

In Ireland I learnt the basics ( A-B-C) of English with our sisters, some of whom I knew from the Novitiate. The hospitality/welcome in Irish families reminded me of African hospitality- simple, warm, discreet and patient. Our sisters there didn't have big apostolic structures such as schools and hospitals – different from other local congregations. Thus they could stay close to families, and open to their needs.

In **England** Mary Annunciata and Anna worked in Portsmouth prison. In the course of one visit they 'imprisoned' me for three hours to speak with a group of prisoners. I knew little English but the heart conveys more than words do. I realised how all prisons in the world have something in common- prisoners awaiting everything (dependent for everything), very little mercy and compassion or respect (which conceals itself behind 'facts'.) Little patience and listening, little forgiveness in their violent and desperate gestures. There too as in Ngozi and California I felt an internal attraction to prayer and compassion. It seems our founder was particularly drawn to prisoners – to be for them an instrument of mercy and compassion.

### **Belgium.**

In Belgium Cécile Walrave, a worker sister- a cleaner- shared in the life and struggle for justice for women. Vatican 2 opened the doors of communities and dioceses to a life inserted among the poor. She (Cecile) struggled with the women (mostly foreigners) for justice, for safety and for respect. Her home in an alley-way in Brussels reflected her life of communion with the poor. The same is true of her today. She has never failed in her mission.

### **Africa.**

How can I give specific comment on something that touched my heart each time that I returned to Africa? It seemed to me that I was returning HOME – to 'drink from the well' and re-connect with friends.

### **General Chapter.**

The General Chapter of 1981 overturned for a second time my concrete plans to return to Burundi. I have endless gratitude to Burundi for having opened my heart and spirit to the poor- my teachers.

'God's ways are not our ways'. The new General Team- Cathleen McCarthy, Margaret Mary Haller and myself- had received a mandate according to the directive of the Congregation for Religious to re-write the Constitutions. Cathleen together with Helen Lane (named by the Chapter) did this work inspired by the Spirit- to be faithful to the essential elements voted by the General Chapter- they had to put it all to music! Their precious work allowed us- after much to-ing and fro-ing among the communities and the Congregation for Religious- to receive approval for our Constitutions on May 31<sup>st</sup> 1984. During our General Chapter in California the new Constitutions were given to the sisters. A new General Team was formed with Joan Roddy as the fourth member.

In Rome the encounter with other Congregational leaders, with other cultures, other life-projects and other Christian denominations all called me anew and nourished my inner thirst for communion.

## **October 1981.**

I left for Nairobi en route for Burundi and Uganda. It was there while on retreat with my spiritual director that the word HERMIT first emerged.

God has a sense of humour but leads us with 'leading strings of love'. I had 8 years ahead of me to allow this call to mature and be discerned in daily life – this idea which had opened up so suddenly.

I had to obey and respond to the service of the Congregation and there was no space to listen to that word. It would remain silently within me until 1985 becoming a companion on the journey. The seed matured in silence.

On returning from the General Chapter in California in 1985 I shared with Cathleen, Margaret Mary and Joan the sense of that future call. I admired their respect and their silence. We did not speak further about it but they did afford me times of solitude and of prayer- of withdrawing from the daily reality. Mary's response at the Annunciation often came to me: 'How can this be done?' I knew that in the years ahead there would be a maturing of a call and that it would pass through the fire of purification. In the face of the fullness of the responsibility that weighed on me. I saw and heard again the voice of the Spirit that spoke to the Churches.

Rome is a privileged place for international encounters, for the passing through of people, sharing their experiences of places that they came from. This opened the eyes and the heart to the cry of the world.

A powerful experience was the participation in the work of UISG of which I was a member and the joy of being part of different commissions such as: CELAM. This allowed me to be in contact with Religious Life in other parts of Africa such as Kinshasa, Lagos, Cape Coast, Lomé. I was an envoy of UISG at the day of prayer in Assisi in May 1984.

Pope John Paul 2 in a prophetic gesture invited representatives of the different religions to pray for world peace. Each one addressed God and prayed for peace, expressing themselves in their own language, in their own personal rite and with their own ceremonial dress. One example was the Indian /Native American smoking his peace pipe, the Monk Hindu enveloped in a sari, bowing humbly, representatives of other African Religions etc.

The representatives of different Christian faith traditions (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant together addressed the same prayer to God. That was the Our Father. To signify our unity in God but also our particular divisions, the Pope had initially sent each of the representatives who were present and their communities in a prayerful place of Assisi where the morning was spent in prayer of intercession according to the custom of each one.

What pained and shocked me most was to go into one of the little streets/roads and see a group of Jews assembled at a street corner. I wanted to know why they were outside. One of them said to me: 'It was here in the past that we had a synagogue which was burned and destroyed and never re-built. They no longer had a synagogue in which to assemble together. It was a day that unsettled me at a deep level and spoke to me of my thirst for unity, ecumenism expressed in the prayer; 'May they all be One, Father.'



In the three meetings which we had with Pope John Paul 2 Religious Life and its adaptation was called into question fully. Each Congregation had to write anew its Constitutions in line with Vatican 2 and in the light of the experiences of the previous years. John Paul 2 invited the members of UISG to share in the joys and sorrows of the congregations which we were represented. He listened, spoke little but responded in his own name to certain burning questions. We discovered a listening man who did not seem to be liberal 'officially'. The conversation continued during the meal and what surprised me was his response to a question about wearing the veil.

'Personally I wish that sisters would be recognised and would wear a veil but I would never oblige them.' This means that despite the rules, we have (put in place for conveyed what we consider significant values in post Vatican 2 Religious Life. the Pope adopted a 'unity in diversity' approach – despite the outward of external signs

Kaire consists of a group of sisters from different Christian denominations living in Europe who meet together each year in a European country. My thirst for ecumenism was decisive and it took me a field in friendship, in a communion in prayer and life encounter especially with Orthodox sisters of Lavrion and Anatoli (Greece) and with the Protestant community of Grandchamp (Switzerland), a female community based on and inspired by the rule of Taize.

I had the grace of being able to spent weeks in the Orthodox communion of Lavrion and Anatoli, participating in prayer, work and meetings, (Greek is not my cup of tea!) The events which touched me deeply and which were a symbolic sign of our unity with the Orthodox tradition took place before my departure for the hermitage in North Cameroon. I was in the monastery of Lavrion. According to the Orthodox rite a person who detaches themselves from community life in order to live an eremitical life of solitude and silence receives a special blessing to confirm and mission them. It is a prayer of communion with that community. The spiritual father invited me to receive it in order to be a true member of that community. As sign of communion he also gave me a relic of two hermit martyrs, one from the desert of Judea and the other close to Jericho.

What is there to say of all the richness of communion in Christ which was born in those encounters; of all the challenges picked like wild flowers along the path. They have shaped my heart and my life forever. Most of all through the Roman commissions/group and the visits with the sisters my 'tent' has been once again stretched to the size of the world.

The Spirit which speaks to the churches opened my heart to a Universal love, to a listening to the cry of the poor and an attraction to respond through a prayer which is unlimited.

I seems to me that all becomes ONE with humanity through intercession.

To see and to listen- such a strong theme in the Bible- has become the leitmotif in daily life, inspired by that Word of God addressed to Moses: 'I have seen and I have heard' said Adonai 'the cry and misery of my people and I COME to deliver them' (Ex 3.7.). The coming of the incarnate Jesus is the fruit of the 'God who so loved the world that He sent His son to save us. (Jn 3:16). It is this mystery which lives in my heart and life, in my seeing and in my listening. It is this mystery of the Trinitarian love which illumined the final stage towards the eremitical life.

## Jerusalem.

At the end of the General Chapter in Brussels which elected Joan Roddy as Superior General along with Linda Webb and Marie Jose Baranyanka in 1989, the Congregation offered me a year's sabbatical in Israel. It was a year of grace on the Lord's part whose impact I didn't foresee until I later lived in a Jewish village in the midst of Palestinians.

The Institute Ratisbonne allowed me to follow course of Hebrew, rabbinical commentaries on sacred texts and other subjects connected with the study of the Hebrew bible. The Bible became more and more the Word which is life- my companion for all my days. It was also a unique opportunity to be present for the Sabbath prayers, to visit synagogues (of different culture and nationalities), of meeting Jewish families and living the Jewish Passover, the Feast of Tents etc. It was a concrete initiation into the Jewish faith which we read about in the Biblical texts (Old and New Testaments). It was a true joy to live with the Jews who themselves spoke to us of their faith. An example: one day while I was waiting for the bus I overheard two women chatting and discussing and I heard this question: 'When will the Messiah come? Do you believe that He will come soon?' In my astonishment I almost missed the bus!

The division of the city of Jerusalem between Jews and Palestinians also marked me as at the end of the academic year I lived for two months in the old city. I saw the lines of pilgrims from all over the world- as noisy as children who had been let loose.

I lived close to the Wailing Wall and to the corner of the Via Dolorosa. I could also hear the Muslim call to prayer and pray with the Jews who placed their intentions in the cracks of the Holy wall, I could see and hear the internal divisions of Jerusalem. I came down sometimes to the Garden of Olive near the Basilica of the Nations which in a short time would have a big impact.

Throughout all that year the thought of the eremitical life simmered in my head along with the question: 'How will it be done?'

In a certain confusion I wrote to Joan and the General Team to ask permission to live as a hermit but within the congregation. Her response was very encouraging. It 'breathed' the confidence and spirit of openness of the congregation: a particular call at the heart of Religious Life. Her letter of January 1990 confirmed it: "May your praying presence help our sisters to see where lies the essential values of the Beatitudes, responding to the needs of the whole congregation; to be in the heart of the Congregation one's heart a presence of contemplative prayer in solitude for the salvation of the whole world; to be at the heart of the world, alone and in solidarity, united together with 'Jesus Christ, His Church and all our brothers'. (Const No 1-2)

My entire life in the Congregation had opened the way to a new call. Our community life and prayer life, the people I met and the places I visited; listening to the witness of life and faith harvested like precious pearls along the way and in more hidden places. 'Whoever has ears to hear, let him listen to what the Spirit is saying to the Churches.' (Ap 2:7)

It is good to recall here that this call at the heart of the Congregation was new. Before Vatican 2 it would had to leave the congregation so as to respond to this call. Following Vatican 2 a new code of Canon Law had been written in accordance with the decisions of the Council. Canon 603 and 605

specify that the Church officially recognises hermits (no 603: 1&2) each with his/her own rule recognised and accepted by the Bishop of the place.

'Besides Institutes of consecrated life, the Church recognises the life of hermits and anchorites, in which Christ's faithful withdraw further from the world and devote their lives to the praise of God and the salvation of the world through the silence of solitude and through constant prayer and penance.'

It was at the Sisters of Sion in Ein Karem ,in their contemplative community that I made a directed retreat prior to my return to Europe. I began with Job. I found myself completely assimilated into him. After a week of struggle, of fright, of refusal, of doubt, I despaired like him, crying towards the heavens: 'Take anyone, Lord but not me!' On August 6<sup>th</sup>, the Feast of the Transfiguration of Jesus, the Jesuit suggested that I climb the mountain with the three disciples and remain there in silence- watching and listening.

Seeing the disciples scared the Spirit made me aware that these were the same disciples whom Jesus had invited to the Garden of Gethsemane. He had invited them to 'stay here and keep watch with me' (Mt. 26-36). It was an invitation to pray with Jesus for

- the world 'which he so loved' – the same world in which he had wished to be born, to live and to share in the lot of the very poor.
- The world of which he offered 'the love of the heart of our God.'
- The world which nailed Him to the Cross.
- The world which could sing at East 'Happy fault which gave us such a Redeemer
- The world which finally became the receptacle of the mercy and compassion of a God-Love who took upon himself the sins of the world.

Jesus invited me to 'stay here and keep watch and pray with Him for the world."



It seemed to me that the world and myself were ONE in Jesus, united in a prayer of intercession and offering to the Father 'that all may be one' in the Trinity of love.

Then when I turned my gaze to the Basilica of the Nations I understood in as far as possible- but without a moment's hesitation or inner conflict that it was there that I needed to dwell. To dwell with Jesus in prayer with him in silence and solitude for all the Nations....

*The hermitage of the nations was born by pure grace, from Jesus in agony for the world.*

It was in Africa in North Cameroon that this dream of God was realised.

On returning to Belgium in September 1990 I awaited my visa for Cameroon at the community of Rue Traversiere with Madeline and Simone. It was a haven of peace before setting out for the unknown.

On February 15<sup>th</sup> 1991 in the midst of a snow storm the plane took off for Paris en route to Cameroon.

## The Kite Flying.

### **Africa**

One of our sisters who wishes to remain anonymous spoke of my life on the mountain of the Mada on the Silver Jubilee of my eremitical life:

'I wish you a renewed awareness of all of the marvellous blessings that God placed along your path and also a recognition of the beautiful heritage of prayer and compassion which marks your DMJ life. I think of your vocation as a hermit and it resembles the one who flies a kite into the skies during a wild and windy day. The kite can fly over all and it manages the wind because there is someone stable anchored to the ground who holds the cord. We, DMJ, are out and about in our active ministries in the world and sometimes flying everywhere. You are someone who is especially anchored and who anchors our energy behind us. For that I am so grateful and I feel the power of your prayer for all of us.' (L 1-2-17)

All throughout the years I have also heard other echoes from our sisters which ask as I do myself: 'What is the eremitical life? What do you do all day?' Today however I have no fixed definition because a call adapts itself to concrete present situations and always maintains a mysterious face. The present is the 'today of God.' There are also sisters who challenge me and 'refuse to believe.' It is to the latter that I find myself closest because each day Jesus at Gethsemane intercedes before the father for our lack of faith 'why do you sleep?'

### **Mayo Ouldeme**

If I managed to join Sr Monique and Louis Marie at Mayo Ouldeme it is thanks to their welcome, their communion in God's project but also thanks to their discreet availability in taking the first step in the Northern region. Their presence, their concrete and discreet help, their faith and confidence in that call was my greatest support. The Little Brothers of the Gospel were also knowledgeable guides and models of integration among Mada and Ouldeme.

The Bishop of the Diocese of Maroua-Mokolo, Mgr de Bernon was the first to accept this call of God. He had never been able to welcome a contemplative Congregation into the diocese, he said, because of an inability to help them financially and he firmly believed that a diocese would not achieve its evangelical objectives without the support of a praying community. For lack of a better option he accepted me as a praying member on the Mada mountain.

At Mayo- Ouldeme where I lived for 10 months I could listen, share, question, learn a little of the Mada language and know the families in their own milieu with the rhythm of the seasons, the cultures and the traditional and Christian feasts. In a word to learn to take my first step in the midst of my future friends, the poor who had become my teachers. The time at Mayo Ouldeme also gave me (the possibility to write) my future rule of life which became (after the Gospel) a faithful guide.

## Mandalza

On 6<sup>th</sup> January 1992, feast of the Epiphany, Mgr de Bernon, the Little Brothers and our sisters at Mayo-Ouldeme and Meme came up with the villagers and the elders of the Mountain. They were all there to witness my commitment to the eremitical life in the church.



That day I felt each one represented a face of the world which God 'so loved.' The call of Jesus to stay close to Him in prayer at the Garden of Olives had become my garden of intercession for the Nations.

The thirst for the Word of God and the desire to be faithful to the eremitical tradition of the church opened me up to the bare reality of the life at the Mountain. I had only the Bible with me, the Hebrew commentaries and the book of the Philocalia. The hours of prayer in front of the Blessed Sacrament in view of nature which spoke of the Infinite and faced with a hot climate- all this demanded a slow rhythm of life and stripped bare (which hones and) polished my heart and spirit – freeing it from all that is not centred on the essential. 'No one can serve two masters.' These experiences became my friends- teaching me the way of poverty and letting go.

Awfet who built the sare (huts) with some villagers became a trusted man who helped me in that dry place. In the first day of sowing/planting he gave me a big lesson in truth. He came at the beginning of the rainy season to help me plant the millet seeds as the Mada did it (in the Mada tradition.) Then he was to show me how to separate the shoots etc. One day, tired no doubt of my ignorance, he came back and said to me: 'But Bernette.., you know nothing!' Yes, it was the Mada who taught me to make a fire with light. They taught me to measure the water I would use which I received as a treasure every morning. Ndengwezhe or Damangaz climbed with the clay pot on the head- what balance! The children showed me the edible wild fruits, the leaves and the fruits that could be dried and other daily gestures which help me to survive.

Maya, the mother of Awfet came to guard the sare while I went to Sunday prayer. It was mostly the rhythm of keeping watch and sleeping; we became accomplices with the pipe (made of local metal). At my return she would offer it to me and I would try to take a few puffs!! That continued until she passed away one evening at the dispensary of Mayo-Ouldeme. Later, her oldest son held the customary meeting with the elders. To my great surprise I was called and Awfet presented me with his mother's pipe. It is a precious presence with me – like a symbol of our friendship and communion.

If I didn't read books often, I had the readings of life events, in the solitude and the silence. One evangelical lesson received from the elders is worth recounting. One year I had a severe invasion of snakes in the sare. At night they even fell from the roof of the hut. Awfet then decided to call the elders for prayer to banish the snakes. One morning early three elders arrived, each one carrying a small empty calabash while Awfet carried a clay pot of traditional beer and a large calabash. The elders sat around the big empty calabash and Awfet poured some beer in that of the elders.. The first raised his calabash and prayed to Zhegla(God). Then he poured the beer into the big calabash. The other two did the same. That full calabash with the prayers of each one was offered and drunk

by each of us. They then went sprinkling the beer in the surrounding field, The houses/huts and the mountain praying in a loud voice. It was a veritable procession! I was very impressed by their gestures and I wanted to understand the meaning of pouring from individual calabashes into the one unique calabash. This was the response: 'Each one of us has prayed to banish the snakes, then we poured the prayers into one single calabash, interceding together before Zhegla. The individual prayers became a single offering and we shared together in drinking it.' Was that not a Eucharistic gesture? Do not ask me if the snakes returned. That was no longer the essential thing.

Another luminous moment that I keep in my heart: One Sunday after the Eucharistic celebration at Mayo-Ouldeme I returned to the mountain passing by the Mayo (a dry river). An elder who washed there accosted me and proposed coming with me. Living alone was not understood. I replied; 'I am not alone. I am with Zhegla.' He looked at me with astonishment, silence and then he said: 'Okay, it is true you are not alone.' Another page of the Gospel!

And to speak of the connections with the families of the village: the children who came to hide the wild fruits in order to sell then later at the market; the women who cut the wood and asked the water on their way back; the youth who accompanied me while playing the flute as I returned to the mountain; the monkeys who destroyed my millet field; the hyenas who howled for the whole night forcing me to go back into the hut for the rest of the night..and there in the silence, the windstorm or the torrid sun. Jesus was present through the Eucharist and all the daily events. He invited me to universal prayer, the intercession for the Nations and to an inner stripping bare in order to allow the Spirit to speak.

Nine years passed on the Mountain ,forged my life to the rhythm of the seasons, the cultures, the sharing of the calabash and such unexpected events. The eremitical life was inseparable (indistinguishable) from the real life of the poor who always remained my teachers and my friends and in the presence of my sisters who had founded a second community at Meme in 1987.

The Congregation and more specifically the Africa Province was very present on the Mountain. In 1994 Joan Rody visited our sisters and climbed to the hermitage of the Nations. She became a witness to 'God's project.' Agnes Charles had become the Provincial for Africa and thus the person responsible for organising different meetings with the countries of Africa. One particular meeting took place at Mayo-Ouldeme. Together the participants climbed the Mountain in order to experience life there. We had a day of prayer on the theme: " The Water Jug Pot" There was also for them an experience of silence and solitude. The Lord speaks in and through all.

I regarded the presence of our sisters as an asset and was aware that without them I could not life on the heights. Since Meme had been founded Agnes, Renee, Jen, Rosemary and some other sisters came to visit with such sensitivity and pleasure.

Then when Marie Jose Baranyanka became provincial for Africa in 1997(she was based in Yaoundé, she called Monique to Yaounde to help her with the responsibility.Tthe decision had to be taken to close Mayo-Ouldeme. Louis Marie was" part of Meme". Their sisterly support and their presence on the ground was greatly missed by the people ,;and me!

The sudden death of Jen Condron on 16<sup>th</sup> April 1998 made a profound impact on our little community of the North. On Palm Sunday April 9<sup>th</sup> 1998 Jen was hospitalised at Tokombere She

was treated for malaria(?). As it was necessary for a family member to nurse the sick, I suggested that I stay with her. Throughout Holy Week her health deteriorated and there was no possibility of a more in-depth investigation. On Good Friday the decision was taken to fly down to Yaounde and to send her back to London. The plane would not leave till Easter Monday. After 16 hours of travel the plane landed at Yaounde . Everything was hastily arranged for her to return to England. The ambulance was ready, a nurse would accompany her etc. However, her condition deteriorated and a military doctor was called on to resuscitate her. It was without success and she drew her final breath on 16<sup>th</sup> April in front of us – we who were powerless. We felt she had given us the gift of accompanying her on her final journey to the Father. So often Jen had expressed her desire to do the will of the Father. Her sudden death profoundly unsettled us. The most appropriate hymn at the funeral Mass was: ‘If the grain of wheat doesn’t fall to the ground and die...’ She remains our ‘seed’ which produced fruit in the North Cameroon despite the uncertainties in which we lived there. Jen is buried in the cemetery of Yaounde, facing the Cathedral- there where she never lived. She responded to the call of Jesus to follow Him to the end. God’s ways are not our ways yet he lead us with ‘leading strings of love,’

On returning to my place, a boy from the village came to tell me that the only child of Ndengwezhe had died of violent malaria. (She had already lost 5 children.) If the sense of community resides in prayer, there are also situations that demand a compassionate presence. I went down at that time and I saw Ndengwezhe sitting alone in a field near her homestead. Her body was gently balanced and she murmured words over the heap of soil which covered her daughter’s body. My arrival didn’t interrupt her and I joined her silently with flowing tears. We had lost such a dear child. The jug of water which she brought me so faithfully every day had become all the more precious because of her presence and her friendship.

At the beginning of 2000 my health was showing signs of wear and tear. Philippe, our new Bishop, came asking me to go down and look for a solitary place in the plains which would suit me better. After some inconclusive research (solitude is almost impossible in the plains) I returned to Belgium for some tests and for discernment. On departure I had a strong intuition that I would not return to Mandalza. However the Hermitage of the Nations would continue elsewhere and in another way. I lived an indescribable inner ‘stripping bare’ without ever doubting the Lord’s call. He would find me another place if it was His will.

### **In Europe.**

The signs were clearer for others than for myself but the Spirit was the strongest and I had to recognise and accept that my physical strength had abandoned me. Leaving Africa, the Mountain, the friends, the poor- my teachers, to ‘giving one’s life to those whom one loves’ according to the example of Jesus- all this would take on a new dimension in Europe.

The eremitical life is not limited to a place but a silent milieu is a help and a support along with NATURE which inspires with the presence of the Creator and Father of all. It is also a path towards inner silence.

In 2000 Agnes Charles, Superior General and her team accepted that I continue to live in silence and solitude in Europe ‘in a country where there are sisters of the congregation’. (letter of

24/4/2000), followed by a letter of transfer of Province issued by Marie Jose Baranyanka (letter of 13/11/2000).

From March to December I researched different locations, different monastic communities (in Belgium and in France) which had hermitages and finally, after doubts and questions, visits and research, I received an invitation from Sr Annunciata (living in the Diocese of Portsmouth in the village of Wickham). She wrote to me of an available caravan near to the swamp and other caravans of prisoners on 'rehabilitation'.

Concrete signs were never lacking along the way; they had become signs of the Spirit which spoke in different tongues! More and more I lived in the certainty that it was not 'my' call but that of the Lord who leads us with 'leading strings of love.' Finally it is He who would lead me to where He is present.

Sheila Moloney and her team then accepted me into the English Province: perhaps they didn't know what they were taking on! Their welcome, their generosity and their patience was never lacking.

15<sup>th</sup> December 2001: the route towards the caravan. We took the route, with Felicé, towards Lake View House where the two sisters- Anna and Annunciata- awaited us. Night had fallen and next day a glance outside revealed other caravans dispersed here and there, occupied by men released from prison- as well as that of Anna and Annunciata.

On 25<sup>th</sup> January 2001 (Feast of the conversion of St Paul and the end of the week of prayer for Christian Unity) Mgr Crispin Hollis, Bishop of Portsmouth, came with Sheila Moloney as representative of the English Province, Agnes Charles and Felice Wright to accept me to live as a hermit in his Diocese and in the English Province.



'To be there for the whole church; to be there as a pardoned sinner who has found peace and who rejoices in the merciful love of God.' (Const no 6).

Agnes recalled and re-affirmed our deep connection in the heart of the Congregation. 'Each sister whom I have met and with whom I have contact, fully recognises that it is a grace for all of us that you are DMJ and that we can count on you and entrust our prayer intentions, certain cares and concerns that each one has and that you are a help for each one to become more fully 'an instrument of God's mercy' there where we are called to live and serve. '

I learnt day by day that Anna, a Franciscan sister, was the practical woman- hers were the hands cooking for all, going in a little van to distribute food at lunchtime, looking after the men, the crops, the animals. Annunciata was occupied with the paper-work for the men in relation to their 'justice affairs' and all the bureaucracy linked to that location. One might say: one was the head and the other, the hands (or both of them 'the heart', I suppose.)

Discreetly I came to know each day the broken and wounded men and little by little we became 'accomplices.' One evening at around 9.30 there was a knock on my door. It was unusual. Thierry, with his dog on his shoulder said: 'I have come to say goodbye because tonight I'm going to do a



runner.’ I didn’t know what to say but we hugged each other and the next day he had gone. (Obviously that wasn’t the only such case.) The men taught me a lot by their simple humanity and their courage in the face of an uncertain future.

Life at Wickham was a new stage of life. I lived closer to human realities but the change up-turned not only the habits of the past but the inner availability which became more basic, challenging and disturbing. The solitude and silence were no longer a natural part of life which had been a precious support at the Mountain. They became a gift to live in the depths of the heart and the concrete communion with those around me, seeing God present in all people and all things”.

Philippe Stevens, the Bishop of Maroua-Mokolo, wrote on 6<sup>th</sup> August 2001, the Feast of the Transfiguration: “How are you in the caravan of prayer somewhere in a corner of England, in a corner of the world?? Every part of the world is beautiful for living with God, for taking time for Him, for giving Him one’s life. And you remain in the Hermitage of the Nations in your prayer and through your prayer you are united with all Nations, with all God’s children but very especially and certainly with the Mada, the Ouldeme, the children of God in our Diocese which you continue to love. I am sure of that. Thank you for what you live, for what you continue to be for us, more than ever.’

It was at that time that I came to know the Orthodox Monastery of Tolleshunt Knights in Essex, a community of mixed religious founded by Fr Sophroni. He had been a hermit in Mount Athos under the care of someone who later became St Silouane L’Athonique (canonised in 1985). He introduced me to the spirituality of St Silouane, through his writings. The grace of that hermit saint illumined my path of life and my thirst to be not only one with the world but that the world would become one in me through prayer. Fr Sophroni revealed throughout his life the grace of universal prayer. He expressed prayer for the enemies and for the entire world as a grace of the Holy Spirit: every day as loving one’s enemies is a gift of a merciful God. “He was consumed by a profound compassion and asked God’s mercy for all the people on earth. It is in a true love for God that a true love for people finds its source. He constantly affirmed that “Divine love does not live in him who doesn’t love his enemies”.

The call of Jesus to be with Him in Gethsemane shone forth anew: to be in intercession with Him before the Father for the whole world in living the love of compassion through love of the enemy. But all is to be asked by the action of the Holy Spirit.

In 2003 after the operation on the hip and the recuperation at St Anne’s Nursing Home it became more difficult on a practical level to stay in a caravan which at times had some problems to remain standing ..and so over to me to find another location.

Each of these consecutive steps (ie several uprooting were like a call to trust the Lord’s fidelity; ) all the moments of doubt/desire to return to the mountain ...had become a time to look towards the Lord, to Gethsemane, to be there in prayer with Jesus for all the Nations.

## Edenbridge.



As I emphasised earlier the Bishop of the Diocese must approve and recognise the presence of a hermit. Mgr John Hine, Agnes Charles (on a visit), Sheila Moloney and Diane (a sister of Sr Andrew ) had been the witnesses of that welcome in the Diocese of Southwark.

Given the different circumstances and life-style from Mandalza, I had to adapt the original rule of life and have it approved. (24.02.2004)

The liturgy, simple and conversational in the Prayer Corner will stay imprinted in me. I had chosen a painting by the artist R Bleninger which I saw in Crete while attending an ecumenical gathering. Every artist had to represent 'hell': I was attracted by this one: people are connected back to back without seeing the faces of others and without dialogue. The rainbow which surrounds them links the three symbols of the Abrahamic religions- expressing the faith of the connected persons- Jews, Christians, Muslims. (Hell is the place where they aren't face to face, the location where there is no dialogue and the place where there is no love.)



As Thomas Merton wrote: 'My call to solitude involves everyone and I have responsibility for all people, not only for mine.' Pastor Bourget, a Protestant hermit in France, also wrote: 'The hermit belongs to all Churches. There is a different identity of confession ,but it is overcome by the vocation. The hermit lives in the tension between ONE Church and the divided Church. He/she lives the two realities at the same time as she carries in prayer the suffering of that division. Thus the hermitage 'Koinonia/Communion' is a sign of healing; it is God's invitation to heal the world by prayer and intercession. It is a renewed call to live the charism of our congregation to be an instrument of mercy and compassion in the hands of God.'

The Sisters of St Andrew whom I knew in the course of the Kaire meetings had an empty building which had served as a nursing home in the past. This location was very different to the caravan at Wickham but offered by way of contrast nature which invited praise. 'The heavens proclaim the glory of God, the firmament recounts the work of His hands.'

The spirituality of the Srs of St Andrew appealed to me greatly by their ecumenical openness, their /link and presence at Taize, their retreats and activities open to the needs of youth. Their welcome encouraged and supported me during the three years lived at their place.

In August 2005 our sisters held the General Chapter at Emmaus. They organised a visit to Edenbridge and we prayed together and shared the life of the Congregation- a precious encounter which once again confirmed me in the call to universal prayer in the heart of the Congregation.

After three years the means of communication (train and bus) had become impossible to access. Living independently had become a crucial question which drove me to accept the proposal of Felice and the regional team to go and live at a flat in South Gate (West Wickham) close to our sisters.

### **West Wickham.**

From the 15/07/2006 to today (2017) I have moved three times within the same house (without mentioning the demolition of St Joseph's and South Gate)- all teaching me detachment and inner flexibility.

Why talk about the different locations? The first reason is that they are an important support to this life of solitude and silence. Next there was a geographical proximity towards our sisters at West Wickham (current activities, visits etc) which challenged me in daily life. Finally nature is no longer the environment which inspired me and expanded my spirit. However, seeing the physical limitations, the regional team took particular care to adapt the place with a view to the possibility of continuing to live there in silence and solitude. I am very conscious of that and grateful for it. It is an on-going call to 'stay here and keep watch with Him.'

I note finally that I have had the grace to be able to continue over several years to go to Greece and live with the Orthodox community, St John the Baptist of Anatoli. That was a precious resource and vital to nourish and clarify the call to prayer of intercession for and with the world.

There I also had the experience of 'total inclusion' in the community to the point where I had -like the sisters- daily chores: the times to be present for prayer, while others cultivated, occupied themselves with farming and other essential activities for life. I also discovered that during the period of major work one sister was designated to pray the Hours in the Church while the others worked. She was present there for and with everyone.

It is a little like I was called to live in our active congregation- a particular apostolate as Joan had written- a responsibility which could only be lived in poverty and dependence on 'the merciful love of our God.' Lk 1.76.

At West Wickham I was also challenged by the people I met and the links forged with them. A recurring question was: 'What do you do during the days- apart from prayer?' It is an essential question in a society to know what one 'produces' and how one is useful! Certainly that was my temptation to search for something to do, to produce cards (which I loved to do) but to do it prayerfully with a spirit free so as to be united with the world, to become more in solidarity with the poor, my teachers, and solitary to hear the cry of the world and to carry it into the silence of God.

Thanks to the 'merciful love of the heart of our God'. (Lk 1)

Thanks to the presence in communion with our sisters throughout the world. And thanks to all those who have punctuated my tortuous paths.



I hope to be there for the whole Church and to be there as a pardoned sinner who has found peace in the merciful love of God. Constit.6

The Congregation is for me the place that I have been given to live the one call, , the place to be with Jesus in Gethsemane, to share in His prayer to the Father for 'all the Nations.'

Thanks for being the location where I can respond in poverty with the help of your prayer to the desire and the charism of our Founder 'to be an instrument of mercy and compassion in the hand of God.'

'Gratitude protects you that you may never stop singing in your heart a perpetual song of thanksgiving.' CVC letters and message to my temporary profession.

Holy Thursday, April14th 2017 -

Bernadette