

My connection with the Ladies of Mary? It has existed since 1959. First as a high school student in Uccle and then through my work in the secretariat and the finance office there until 1998.

After the Second Vatican Council, there was an opening up in the Church to the developing countries.

Previously Belgians went mainly to Congo, Rwanda and Burundi. The Ladies of Mary decided to go to work in Latin America. Sister Marie-Claire Focquet and Sr. Simone Vandensteene left for the place where the first Ladies of Mary would settle. They did not want to create schools etc ... but put themselves at the disposal of the Church and the people in order to help.

In 1965, Sr. Simone (Irma Joana) asked that the lay women wishing to join them there prepare themselves. So we, Thérèse Martin, Micheline Dusart and I, attended medical assistant courses at the Faculty of Lille and then attended a course at the Latin American College in Leuven to study Portuguese, Brazilian history, etc. We also attended the Institute of Developing Countries.

And the great day arrived. We went together, we 3 (Thérèse Martin, Micheline Dusart and I) to join the first team in Macau (about 500 km from Recife).

We had a wonderful experience that made a deep impression on us. We shared the life of the nuns (no enclosure). Our house was open to all.

The team was in charge of various missions. There were classes at the school for all because local teachers were not available: courses in mathematics, French, English, religion ... Work in the parish: the priest was in charge of several parishes in Macau and our help was welcome.

There were the youth movements of which Sr. Margarete and Micheline took care as well as the area of catechesis which was mainly the responsibility of Sr. Marie-José Baranyanka.

We also ministered in the working-class neighbourhoods: literacy classes for workers, who worked in salt manufacturing, little talks about nutrition, hygiene, and caring in a small dispensary.

Our contacts with the people were excellent. The sisters who were already there helped us to integrate. As two Brazilian women lived with us, our common language from the beginning was Portuguese. We all "forgot" our mother tongue.

After one year at the request of the bishop, another house in Santa Cruz (another locality in the Nordeste) was taken by the Ladies of Mary: Micheline, Sr. Margarete and Sr. Cécile went there.

In Macau, following the departure of Irma Joana (for health reasons) Sr. Ruth arrived from the USA, Sr. Mary Cronin and Sr. Sheila Tucker. We continued sharing our daily life,

reflections, and we have memories that we will never forget. We have bonds between us religious and lay women and we are friends. We had the same ideals and on our return we continued to meet.

As for the students of Macau: after 50 years, I still have links with some of those students. 3 have already come to Belgium to visit.

After Brazil, I resumed my work at the school in Uccle.

When I retired, Sr. Laetitia asked me to work with Sr. Edmee, the bursar of the Belgium Region. I accepted and since then I am part of the finance and administration group with Srs. Agnès Charles, Laetitia Geerærts, Cécile Walrave and Marie -Thérèse Vankrunkelsven.

Marie Jeanne Mevisse

