

NEVER A BORING MOMENT !

MEMORIES OF A MISSIONARY

Michel Meunier, M.Afr.

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FOREWORD

So happy to have read this masterpiece! I had a nice journey!
I have a feeling of coming back from a long trip!
What a rich and marvelous life! I can't believe this is only a
summary! Hope you'll do volume 1,2,3...
One imagines the scenes; it's interesting and gradual! In the
beginning, one is not so sure about the punch when, all of a
sudden, suspense strikes! You want to know what next!
The pictures are splendid, real and vivid. They perfectly
express what words might not fully convey.
Congratulations and thank you for this fruitful mission!
And it goes on!

Cordially,

Claudine Mpanga, M.A. (Linguistics)

To my sister Ghislaine,
you who have been a
musical and artistic inspiration.
You left us for a better world
a few months before this book came out.
You can read it now
in paradise!
Thank you for your visit in Africa!

.....

This book is published
on the occasion of
my jubilee of
fifty years of
priesthood.

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LEXICON

Some initials and acronyms you will find in the text:

MSOLA	Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa (aka White Sisters)
Afar.	Missionaries of Africa (Society of the) (aka White Fathers)
CCCB	Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops
YCS	Young Catholic (or Christian) Students
YCW	Young Catholic (or Christian) Workers
KBC	Kenya Broadcasting Corporation
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
JRS	Jesuit Refugee Service
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
PISAI	Pontifical Institute for Studies of Arabic and Islamology
ID	Identity card
Parish Priest	The priest in charge of a parish
Curate	Assistant to the Parish Priest
<i>Confrère(s)</i>	A French word used among the M.Afr., meaning a fellow Missionary of Africa

INTRODUCTION

On the occasion of my leaves from Africa, a priest friend of mine, who liked to listen to my stories, often jokingly said to me: *"Travelers from afar can lie with impunity!"* The memories I share with you in this book are as close as possible to the truth. Of course time and distance can sometimes "embellish" some stories, but all of them are based on facts. Most of these reminiscences are from Africa because, as we sometimes say among ourselves, White Fathers, we have Africa tattooed on our hearts!

‘Never a boring moment!’ Indeed, my years as a missionary-priest were all full, and my 24-hour days were often too short!

These memoirs are not meant to be a chronologically presented autobiography. They mostly cover the active years of my missionary life in both Africa and Canada. However, some anecdotes come from the time before I joined the Missionaries of Africa. In all these stories I try to follow a certain chronological order, but sometimes the dates may be mixed; then I do not mention them. Occasionally, I choose a theme that includes a few stories on similar topics, despite mixing the chronology. What I write is from memory only. I deliberately use the present narrative tense to render the stories more vivid and easier to read. Moreover, I often change or omit people's names to respect their privacy.

Starting in January 2009, I began writing a monthly chronicle of the previous month's major events, in order to respond to several relatives and friends' wish to know my

monthly whereabouts. Excerpts from these chronicles may be the subject of another publication later.

Having worked in several African countries and in a few cities in Canada and the United States, I sometimes identify places, but not always. While still a Seminarian in Ottawa (1966-1970), I worked during summer in the cities of Buffalo (New York State, in the USA), and Halifax (Nova Scotia in Canada). Since my priestly ordination on May 23, 1970, I spent 14 years in Malawi, 3 years in Ottawa (Canada), 3 months in Tanzania (at the Swahili Language School), 7 years in Nairobi (Kenya), 11 years in Toronto (Canada), 1 year in Angola, 8 years in South Africa and 1 year in Lusaka (Zambia). Always working with Africans, as my vocation dictates.

Some stories are comical, some are more serious, however others will lead you to reflection and, perhaps, to prayer.

Enjoy your reading!

MY TRAVELS

In my early years as a Missionary of Africa, I was fortunate to visit several countries on my way to and from Africa. In those days, airlines allowed stop-overs of a few days, without additional fees. So, beside the countries where I worked, I visited Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Ghana, Nigeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, Lesotho, Swaziland (now called Eswatini),.

In Europe, I also visited France, Italy, Germany, Holland, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, England, Ireland and Bosnia-and-Herzegovina. Everywhere, I was welcomed at our houses of Missionaries of Africa or at some friends'.

I also had two great opportunities to stay for periods of three months in the Holy Land (Israel and Palestine) and, during one of those, to visit Mount Sinai in Egypt. In Jerusalem, the M.Afr. have custody of the Church of St. Anne; according to tradition, the Virgin Mary was born there. We also have a huge residence that was once the major seminary for training the priests in the Melchite rite. Now this seminary is in Beirut (Lebanon), and our house in Jerusalem has been transformed for sessions and retreats.

In 1980, I had the pleasure of spending a few days in Rio de Janeiro where the Marist Brothers welcomed me very warmly. On my way to Montreal, I stopped in Miami, Florida where I stayed with a couple, friends of mine.

Hitch-hiking 16,000 km

This story is a summary of the journal I kept during that trip.

"A 11,000-mile hitch-hiking trip." "Two young men want to travel the new world." These are the headlines of two newspapers about the long journey that Michel Fortin and I undertake during the summer of 1965. We must be back early the following



Michel Fortin and myself

month to be in time for our entry to the novitiate on August 11. So, from July 11 to August 3, we travel through the United States and Canada, making long detours through Niagara, Chicago, St. Louis (Missouri), Oklahoma City, Denver, the Grand Canyon, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Vancouver, Lake Louise (Alberta), the prairies of Western Canada, Ottawa, and finally back to Montreal and finally, home! More than 16,000 km in just over three weeks! It would take too long to narrate all the adventures of this trip, but here are a few of them.

On a U.S. highway, suddenly a patrol car picks us up; the police tells us sternly that hitchhiking on this highway is forbidden. Fortunately, our Scout uniform inspires a certain respect. As it is getting late, they take us to the nearest police station where we spend the night. The next morning, they drive us to a secondary road; very few cars pass by, and we decide to take a chance again on the big highway we can see across the fields. This time we are lucky! A driver stops

immediately (before the police can spot us!) and offers to drive us to Chicago: more than 800 km! At night, we sleep under the stars on the shore of Lake Michigan. We are a little fearful because in our geography book during primary school, we learned that "Chicago is the city of gangsters"! Fortunately, the night is calm; no thefts to report! During this whole North American circuit, we sleep outdoors almost every night. Only once or twice do we use our pup tent. Sometimes we are welcomed in the homes of kind people.

In Oklahoma City, we visit the zoo, then sleep the whole night on the beautiful lawn of a house whose owners seem to be away. The next morning, we are happy to have slept well despite the warning seen yesterday in the reptile and spider section of the zoo that these dangerous critters are all around! After a quick personal hygiene at the outside tap of the back yard, we take a coffee and a doughnut in a nearby restaurant and go our way.

In Las Vegas, the city of gambling, we each bet a 25-cent coin! We lose it, of course! We sleep in an old trailer belonging to a friend's uncle. It is probably the only home without air conditioning in the city! It is extremely hot!

We buy a postcard showing a photo of a beautiful hotel room with whirlpool bath, we mail it to our future Novice Master and ask him to make sure our rooms are ready when we arrive at the novitiate! He will never mention it!

The Grand Canyon of the Colorado river is splendid. Surprise! We meet our former English teacher on a sightseeing tour with some members of his family! We sleep in the local school.

Crossing 'Death Valley' (Mojave Desert), we travel in a car without air conditioning. It is so hot that, even at 100 km/h, the air feels like fire!

In Los Angeles, we are welcomed by some M.Afr. Here we are spoiled: each one of us has his own bed and enjoys a good shower. We stay there for a few days, during which, among other things, we visit Hollywood and Disneyland.

In San Francisco, thanks to a letter of recommendation from the Jesuits of our hometown, we are housed in two student rooms of the University run by the Jesuits. We meet a deacon who takes us by cable cars to visit the city and treats us to a good meal in a restaurant on Fishermen's Wharf. I have always kept in touch with this deacon, now a priest; he even visited me in Kenya!

As we make our way to Northern California, we cross the redwood forest, the 'Valley of the Giants'. These trees can be 110 meters high and have 45 meters of circumference. A single tree can produce timber for 10 to 15 houses! We 'enter' the trunk of one of these giants, set up as a souvenir shop. Then, with our good Samaritan driver, we leave the park by passing through the inside of a redwood tree dug for that purpose. Then, we say goodbye to these giants of creation.

Back in Canada, a Vancouver family takes us home for lunch; then the husband shows us around the city. He leaves us at the cathedral where we spend two nights, each in a private room! Good time off!

We cross the Rocky Mountains and arrive at beautiful Lake Louise, in Alberta. Here we meet a classmate of ours who is working for the summer in the chic Château Hotel. He is quite

surprised and happy to see us! We spend two cold nights in our little tent.

We cross the prairies of Saskatchewan and Manitoba without problem. In northwestern Ontario, we travel with an American in his big Chrysler New Yorker. It is 2:00 am, and the night is pitch dark. Here and there, wild animals emerge from the forest. Our driver is careful, but he drives fast. Suddenly, a huge moose awaits us in the middle of the road, blinded by the headlights. At 100 km/h, the driver kicks the power brakes, the car flips on all four wheels and comes to rest on its side in a soft ditch; fortunately, there are no stones or trees. A tow truck drags the slightly damaged car to Fort William where a mechanic repairs it, and we continue our way! It was a narrow escape! God definitely wanted us to be in time for the novitiate!

On August 3, after travelling in 70 different cars, back in Montreal, we take the bus and arrive in our respective homes around midnight. Without waking anyone up, I enter the house with a hidden key, and go to bed. The next morning, my little brother Jean-Luc wakes me up at 6:00 a.m. and says: "Michel, you're back! Look, I've learned how to whistle!"

It is an adventure we will never forget! Thank you, Lord, for your protection! Today, if I were 20 years old, would I repeat such a trip? I doubt it!

OTHER JOURNEYS

At Rome Airport

In September 1970, I leave for Africa, through Rome. After spending three pleasant days spent with my *confrères* of the General House of our Society of Missionaries of Africa, one of the Assistants of the General Council, Father Robert Chaput, takes me to Fiumicino airport. As this is my first trip to Africa, I have excess luggage. Seeing my concern, Father Chaput assures me that he will take care of it. He knows airport employees well. Weighing my suitcases, the attendant says, "But Padre, you are overweight!" To which he simply replies: "I know. I've been trying so much to lose weight, but it doesn't work!" Laughing, she just tells me to proceed!

Malawi to Congo (DRC)

In 1974, a Dutch *confrère*, Theo Winkelman, invites me to accompany him to his uncle's jubilee: he celebrates 60 years of religious life as a Benedictine in the monastery of Kapolowe in Zaire (former name of the DRC). His family in Holland cannot come, yet they are paying for our trip. For this 2960 km round trip, we travel in a small Peugeot 204. The car is so small, and my *confrère* Theo is so tall, his legs do not fit under the steering wheel! So I have to drive all the way. Fortunately, every night we find accommodation in our missions along the way.

In Lusaka, the capital city of Zambia, we make a two-day stopover. One evening, we have a meal at the Intercontinental Hotel where the youth band of one of our Canadian *confrères*, Réginald Carrière, entertains the diners. These 'Rising Stars'

are really talented and give a great show. They have performed as far away as Europe!

After a few days, we arrive at the Zaire border. There, we face the problem of driving on the right side of the road while our car steering wheel is on the right. So if we want to overtake a vehicle, Theo, sitting on the left, must stick his neck out the window and tell me if the way is clear!

There are also soldiers who, we were told, can be arrogant and stop us any time for routine inspection; it seems they can be quite rude! As soon as we enter the country, we see a group of soldiers gathered around their big truck; one of them waves us to stop. He kindly comes near: they need our help. Their truck has a breakdown, and they do not have the right tools. We lend him some of ours, but our car uses much smaller keys; nothing works. So the young captain asks us to take him to their barracks in Lubumbashi in order to get the required tools. This is our stroke of luck! All along the way, at every roadblock, our new passenger, sitting in the front seat, beckons the soldiers on guard to let us pass without any problem! The rest of the trip goes well; we keep fond memories of it.

A long journey through East Africa

In 1978, I spend nine months in Kenya, at the Gaba Pastoral Institute. With some forty Priests, Brothers, Sisters and lay people, we deepen our faith while trying to find more suitable methods to transmit it: a truly enriching period both by the topics covered and by the exchanges with the participants from more than 15 African countries and as far away as Papua

New Guinea. Here, we can feel the universal missionary Church.

After these nine months, I decide to return to Malawi 'by surface', that is, by various opportunities found along the way: hitch-hiking, buses, trains, by car with *confrères* or Sisters travelling from one mission to another, etc. So, I go through Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, a part of Zambia from where I finally enter northern Malawi. I sleep mostly in our missions, and even once in a small outstation in Kaseye, in northern Malawi, a few kilometres from the border with Tanzania and Zambia. The catechist of the place welcomes me well. His wife serves us a good meal and prepares hot water so I can wash before sleeping in the bed in the sacristy where my *confrères* stay whenever they come from the central mission located far away in the mountains.

Finally, I arrive in Dedza after a journey of more than 3,500 km in one month! A great experience where I had the chance to meet several fellow M.Afr. and see different missions and people of various tribes.

Let me tell you a part of my journey through Tanzania. After more than four hours by train from Tabora (an important city in central Tanzania) to Itigi (220 km), I arrive just in time to hop on the bus to Mbeya, a small town on the border of Malawi and northeastern Zambia. The *confrères* of Tabora warned me to carry a good supply of drinking water, because the journey between Itigi and Mbeya is 500 km long on very bad roads, without shops, let alone restaurants. But as the bus is ready to leave, I just buy my ticket and hop in it. There are already a lot of passengers. Obviously, I am the only White in the bus. No one speaks English, but I manage with the Swahili

I learned in my spare time during my nine months in Eldoret. So we leave in this old uncomfortable bus. After half an hour, a tire of the double rear wheels blows out! So, we go back to Itigi on the spare wheel. For me, it is providential! While the tire is being repaired, I go and get some water and food at the nearby mission of the Missionary Fathers of the Precious Blood, and I quickly return to the bus, ready to leave. Again, after a short time into our journey, the radiator reveals a significant leak. So, we go back once more, stopping several times to add water. Finally, in Itigi, we are told that the departure is postponed until the next morning. This is my chance to get a good night's sleep at the Missionaries of the Precious Blood, and the next morning, after Mass and a hearty breakfast at the Sisters', I board the bus with lots of food and drinking water. The trip will last 23 hours! But, early the next morning, having almost reached the goal, the bus breaks down again! Fortunately, we are only a few kilometres from Mbeya and I have only a backpack to carry. After a 45 minute walk, I finally arrive at the mission of our *confrères* where I can rest for a day before resuming my journey.

A Long Journey through South Africa

As I have been appointed Vocation Director for South Africa, after my Zulu course, I decide to return home via a 4,700 kilometre detour.

On June 1st 2009, after giving a short talk on vocations to a group of diocesan priests, I leave Coolock House (retreat House near the Indian Ocean) for this long journey. This vocational tour takes me to nine dioceses where I meet with six bishops and many priests in charge of vocation work

among the youth. Everywhere I am very well received and I discover a lively Church in solidarity with the poor and the marginalised. Yet, there is some worry: the great lack of vocations. The youth are full of good will, but they are very distracted by the bombarding publicity for more comfort and material wealth constantly thrown at them. Vocations are flourishing everywhere in Africa, except in South Africa. All along my long journey, I sow ideas and leave hundreds of brochures, flyers and posters on God's call to become Missionaries of Africa. We pray that, eventually, it will bear fruit.

Of course, I take the occasion to do some sight-seeing in this beautiful corner of this "Rainbow Nation"¹. I admire wonderful sceneries, especially in the Cape peninsula with "Cape Point" where one sees from the same viewpoint the Indian and Atlantic Oceans! And the legendary "Table Mountain" in Cape Town: the breathtaking nature scenes are wonderful! I also travel through the "Winelands" where the vineyards are so well kept that their beauty is "inebriating"! I meet many tourists from all over the world; many have come for the soccer "Pan-African Cup" and quite a few are planning to come back the following year for the "World Cup". I am really spoiled by mother nature: the previous week, the weather was horrible in the whole Cape peninsula and in almost all the other neighbouring provinces; but during my whole trip, it is just splendid!

¹ A popular name for South Africa. Read Dominique Lapierre's '*A Rainbow in the Night*', 2008.

Mexico

In 1985, while I am in Ottawa for vocation promotion, I go spend two weeks in Mexico with forty members of the *Jeunes du Monde* (Youth of the World) movement. First, we take part in the *World Missionary Youth Congress* in Ciudad Victoria for a week: five thousand young people are gathered to deepen their missionary vocation as Catholic Christians. Then, with eight of these young people, we spend time in Querétaro where I have the pleasure of staying with my *confrères* in their community. We end this trip with a short stay in Mexico City which, a month later, will be struck by a huge earthquake!

Experience in Angola

As I work in Toronto with African communities, Angolan refugees are coming in big numbers; soon they are estimated at a few thousand. As our Canadian government is not very demanding for immigrants to learn our official languages, English and French, many adults speak only Portuguese. Of course, children quickly learn English at school and during other social interactions. But parents have a lot of trouble learning English, and unfortunately, I cannot help because my Portuguese is awful! It is almost impossible for parents to discuss their problems by asking their children to be their interpreters! So I ask our Provincial for permission to go to Angola for a year. He tells me that we do not have M.Afr. communities in that country and that I should rather go to Mozambique. I explain to him that I want to go to Angola not only to learn the language, but also to better understand the people from that country, who have just lived through 27 years

of civil war. In addition, there are very few Mozambicans in Toronto. He then accepts on the condition that I find a missionary community to live with.

The Salesians of Don Bosco are ready to receive me. To prepare myself, I begin to study on my own the basics of the Portuguese language, and on the 1st August 2002, I leave for Angola where no White Fathers have ever worked. It is a challenging but rewarding experience. For eleven months, I encounter a very different Africa from the one I have known, and I manage to learn Portuguese enough to go around visiting families, celebrating Mass and preaching. I even give a few evening sessions on how to start small basic Christian communities.

I live in a suburb of the capital, Luanda, in a real slum, by far the worst I have ever seen. Built on a landfill site, the place is called 'lixreira', Portuguese for garbage dump! The



Dance for the Word of God in Angola

but the fields are still full of antipersonnel mines. Many have been injured and some were killed on exploding mines. Despite their misery, the people are affable, very brave and smiling.

dislocados
(displaced
people)
escaped from
their villages
because of the
war. They
would like to
return home to
their farms,

The Salesian of Don Bosco, mostly from South America, are very welcoming and always show me great respect in their hospitality. Twice I have the chance to travel far inside the country. Upon arriving in one of their missions, their Provincial leaves me the only visitors' room of the rectory prepared for him, and for three nights he sleeps on a camp bed in the parish office! In another mission, it is the parish priest who gives me his room and settles in his office for three days! And when he needs to come into his room to get something, he apologizes profusely! A beautiful spirit of hospitality!

A 'special mission'

Here is a summary of this very special journey.

On Thursday, October 28, 2004, a social worker phones me from a refugee reception Centre in Toronto. She tells me that an Angolan mother will come to my office; she has been in Canada for a few years, and has just received her permanent residency permit. The father, their three teenage children and their 12-year-old son remained in Luanda, the capital of Angola. Unfortunately, the father was imprisoned because of his political commitments, and he was murdered in prison! Meanwhile, the eldest of the girls (15 years old) was raped and is pregnant; in addition, the twelve-year-old son has disappeared! He is the twin brother of the youngest of the girls. A generous family in Luanda takes care of the three young girls, and the father of that family has sent the girls' passports to the Canadian High Commission in South Africa to get the visas stamped in. He would like to take care of the boy too, but no one knows his whereabouts. By phone, the

mother is often in touch with her 3 daughters and this family of Good Samaritans.

The next day, in my office, the mother begs me to go pick up her three daughters; she knows that I lived in Angola for a year. The next day, I go to the Immigration Office and meet with the officer in charge of the case; he confirms that everything is true and if anyone is willing to accompany these three children, the authorities will provide the necessary documents to bring them back without risking being arrested for human trafficking! He knows I am a missionary and that I lived in Angola. He assures me that everything will be fine.

Two Congregations of Religious Sisters in Toronto agree to fund the rescue mission. Indeed, they see that these three girls are in great danger of exploitation and sex trafficking. They give me a good amount of money enough to pay for a round-trip ticket for the 'rescuer' and three one-way tickets (Luanda-Montréal) for the girls.

I contact the Salesian Treasurer in Luanda to ask if any of their Priests, Brothers, Sisters or Lay Missionaries could accompany these three children. Unfortunately, none of them is free. I tell my community *confrères*, who know about the issue, and without hesitation, they suggest that I myself go. They will replace me in my commitments here. I call our Provincial Leader and he agrees.

After a few weeks of preparation, including a few days in Ottawa to get a visa from the Angolan Embassy, I finally leave on November 18. On the 20th, I'm in Luanda, the capital of Angola. Being a Saturday, I cannot do anything. On Sunday, I celebrate Mass with 900 young people in the parish where I lived for a year! My Portuguese is slowly coming back!

On Monday and the following days, the Salesians provide me with a car and a driver who knows the city well. I find the three girls, who seem to be in good health; but the mother who welcomed them, tells me that the second daughter is also pregnant!

I meet the Canadian Consul and his wife, who is also his consular assistant. I have known them since my stay here in 2002 and 2003. Through the Consulate, I receive the message that the three passports have finally arrived in Pretoria (South Africa) and that the visas will be affixed to each upon presenting evidence that the plane tickets have been purchased. After several efforts, we receive the complete medical reports of the three girls. Then, other complications arise. I understand that I have no choice but to go to South Africa to get those passports with the required visas! With the receipts for the three plane tickets in hand, I leave on Monday 29 November for Johannesburg, where I am welcomed by my *confrères*. They kindly lend me a car. I have to go twice to the Canadian Embassy in Pretoria, and with a recommendation letter from the Canadian Consul in Luanda, I finally get the passports with the visas!

But the problems are not over yet. I need another visa for myself in order to re-enter Angola. After a lot of struggling through administrative red tape, I finally get it! I fly back to Luanda on Saturday, December 4th. I arrive at 12:30 pm and, twelve hours later, I leave with the three girls! The plane is full. I am surprised that no British Airways agent speaks Portuguese enough to make the announcements in that language. So must translate all the instructions for the girls sitting in the three seats in the center, while I'm sitting on the

other side of the aisle. This is the first time they leave their country, let alone their first flight! We spend a few hours in transit at Heathrow Airport in London, and then around 2 pm on Sunday, December 5th, we arrive in Toronto. What a joy to see this family come together after so long! On Christmas Eve, the eldest has a miscarriage. The following April, the youngest gives birth to a beautiful baby girl.

Since then, I have met them only a few times; they are not Catholics, therefore they go to the church of their choice. They seem to be happy in their new lives. However, we still have no news of the boy.

I drop my hand luggage in the airplane

Due to a fall, I tore a tendon in my right arm biceps, which often causes me acute pain when I try to lift a heavy object.

On a Sunday evening, after a vocational weekend with some young people in Cape Town, I board the plane going back to Johannesburg. As I try to lift my hand luggage into the compartment above the passenger seats, a sharp pain stabs me in my injured arm and I drop my suitcase of about ten kilograms. It falls on the legs of a strong rugby player of the Springboks national team! I apologize profusely, explaining that I suffer from an arm injury. The huge fellow gets up, and, without a word, takes my suitcase and, with one hand only, deposits it in the luggage compartment! I thank him and take my assigned seat, right next to him. I apologize again and congratulate him, as well as his companion seated next to him: today, they won the game against the Australian team.

The whole Springboks team is sitting around me, and all the players look very tired. Later, I notice that the seat in front of

my fellow, is occupied by a little elderly lady who seems very frail. My God! thank you that my suitcase fell on this strong man, not on her! She could have been seriously injured!

I Travel in First Class!

On a trip back to Africa, between London and Johannesburg, an eleven-hour trip, I am in economy class, as usual. Once in mid-flight, after the signal to remove the seat belt, I get up with some difficulty: my trousers are glued with some chewing gum left carelessly on the seat! I call a flight attendant who, having seen the damage, takes me to the service section. Using a piece of dry ice, he rubs the gum off my trousers. Then he accompanies me back to my seat and tells me that it is not possible to clean it now. So he invites me to change places, but the economy class is full. Therefore, he promotes me to first class! What a luxury! Champagne, good food, and plenty of space to lie down and rest during this long journey!



WELCOME TO AFRICA!

MY

MISSIONARY

BEGINNINGS

A grumpy *confrère* who hides a good heart!

On the flight from Rome, I meet a diocesan priest from France who goes to Malawi to help start a movement for families. He must be welcomed by a French 'White Father' who invited him for this purpose. Once at the Malawi International Airport (near Blantyre, the commercial and industrial capital), I have to go to the hotel provided by the airline before taking my connection for Lilongwe (the political capital of Malawi) the next day in the afternoon.

So I introduce myself as a 'White Father' and ask him if he is a White Father too. He replies in a rather offhand way: "You don't see that I'm white!" I laugh and ask him if he can take me to the Mount Soche Hotel. He nods hesitantly, saying, "You, young people, always have too much luggage, besides, you have this big guitar!" (What a great reception!...) Finally, he agrees and, crammed in his little car, we go to the hotel.

The next morning, Sunday, with the diocesan priest he comes to pick me up, and we go to Mass in a parish not far from the hotel. Afterwards, we attend a YCW meeting of which this *confrère* is the chaplain.

A few years later, our paths cross again, but this time under much better circumstances: I have become chaplain of the YCW and the YCS in the Diocese of Dedza, while he works at the national level; therefore, we meet frequently in a climate of relaxation and prayer, working on projects to help young people build a better future. Neither he nor I knew that a few years later I would replace him as YCS national chaplain!

This *confrère* was much esteemed by the diplomats of the Embassy of France. He even was a recipient of the French

Légion d'Honneur for his 44 years spent in Malawi at the service of the Church. Prior to his final return to France, the ambassador asks him a list of people to be invited for a farewell party in his honour. The first one on the list is the ambassador's chauffeur! Then come the names of YCS and YCW members! And finally, the names of our *confrères*! Thus, we see how he lived the fundamental option for the poor and the little ones!

African languages

Learning an African language is not always easy. At the age of 26, I begin to learn Chichewa, the national language of Malawi – English being the official one. Fortunately, it is a fairly easy language compared to many others across Africa, a continent with more than a thousand languages and dialects!

I spend my first three months in Malawi at a language school in Lilongwe. In the morning, we have grammar and pronunciation classes with a *confrère* who is fluent in Chichewa. In the afternoon, a Malawian catechist comes to teach us about the culture and customs of the *Achewas*, Malawi's main tribe. After a coffee break at 4 pm, we are free until 6 pm. So, I like to walk around the surrounding villages to practice the language with local people. Children especially are good at correcting us, because they laugh when we make a mistake, and then they show us the right expression and pronunciation.

One day I see a few men sitting on the ground in a circle. They are drinking a liquid that simply looks like water. I try speaking my poor *Chichewa*, and out of politeness, I agree to drink with them, thinking it is water or gin. I only take a small

sip and ... I choke! It is so strong that it feels like fire deep down my throat! The men burst out laughing! That is enough for me! I will never again touch this counterfeit drink called *kachasu*, in which they put all kinds of products, including DDT² ! I politely refuse to take a second sip and I just try to talk, and especially to listen to their conversation. I still have a lot to learn!

My first babblings!

After three months at the language school, I am not ready to preach without reading my text. In my first parish (Mua), a retired catechist helps me prepare and write my homilies. Little by little, I get used to it and become more comfortable expressing myself. On Sundays, when I preach in the main parish church, this catechist is present; after Mass, he makes some remarks to help me improve my knowledge of the language, which I appreciate very much. The first time I manage to preach with only a few notes, without reading my text, he comes to me after Mass, and joyfully tells me: "Until today you have been preaching with your paper, but today you preached with your heart !"

"Mpu... mpu... mpunga!"

One day, I visit a catechist busy preparing a group of children for their First Communion. I want to check out their knowledge of the history of Salvation. So, I ask them: "After

² DDT was a commonly-used pesticide for insect control in the United States until it was canceled in 1972 by the United States Environmental Protection Agency.

chasing Adam and Eve out of Eden, God wanted to forgive them and promised to send them a..." (and I'm waiting for the kids to finish the sentence, but to no avail!). So, in the African way, I pronounce the first syllable of the word : "*Mpu...*" and I repeat: "*Mpu...*" Then a little boy answers proudly: "*mpunga!*" The catechist and I laugh heartily: this word means rice! What I wanted as an answer was "*Mpulumutsi*", which means Savior! I expected too much. Often, for these poor children, the stomach is stronger than the mind! In addition, I should have given at least a clue with two syllables: "*Mpulu...*"

Other languages

Following this first experience, I had to learn other languages. In 1989, at the Tanzania language school, for 3 months I study and practice Swahili. I am 45 years old then, and it is a bit harder! When I arrive in Nairobi, Kenya, I must adjust this new language to local expressions. In addition, because of my work with the youths, I have to learn their idioms; as everywhere in major cities around the world, they have their own slang!

In 2002-2003, in Angola, I learn Portuguese; of course, it is not an African language, but by then, I am almost 60 years old, and it is more difficult! Fortunately, this language has many similarities with French.

In 2009, I start studying Zulu in South Africa: at 65, it is even more difficult, especially since it is a click language with so many grammatical whims! Nevertheless, I manage to celebrate Mass and preach, but by reading my text, which I do not like! But people are very understanding.

I thank the Lord for giving me a certain facility in this area. Yet I have known much better gifted *confrères* in mastering African languages. This is certainly useful for a missionary.



With Sister Nok'tula, my Zulu teacher

MY FIRST PARISH: MUA

After more than three months of language study, I find myself in my first parish, in Mua. This is where our first M.Afr. *confrères* settled when they arrived in Malawi in 1889.

Christmas among lepers

Soon after arriving in my first parish, a few days before Christmas, the parish priest sends me to hear confessions at the leprosarium run by the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa (MSOLA). Many of the lepers are Catholics and they come to confession to prepare well for this great feast. I barely understand what they are saying; my chichewa is still too rudimentary!

On Christmas night, I celebrate Mass with the 180 lepers of this small village. Despite their disfigured faces and distorted limbs, half-eaten up by leprosy, I feel in them a great festive joy. They dance and sing with full voice: *'wabadwira m'khola ngati wosauka'* (He was born in a stable, poor like us). I try to give them a message of hope, yet I feel I am taught by them more than I teach them! This is my first Christmas as a missionary-priest, and I will never forget it!

The White Sisters (MSOLA) at the leprosarium

These Sisters are truly courageous and valiant. With great dedication and love, they care for all these suffering lepers. Some of the Sisters are nurses and must perform all kinds of out-of-the-ordinary medical exploits. Sometimes they have to amputate legs or arms already too decayed, using the means at hand as anesthesia.

Since then, the care of lepers has changed a lot. They are now treated at home; their families are given instructions on how to properly take care of their sick relatives and at the same time, how to protect themselves from the disease. Health care workers visit them regularly to examine them and give

them their medication. This is why Mua's leprosy had to close its doors. The premises are now a school for the deaf.

Various Responsibilities

In addition to the regular pastoral care of Masses, sacraments and adult training, the parish priest asks me to take care of the choirs and the youths. I really like all these varied pastoral commitments.

On the parish territory, there are fifteen prayer Centres, each with its own choir. We organize regular meetings of all the choirs so they can teach each other new hymns collected here and there during their travels; but often they are local compositions. Once a year, we hold a competition to choose the best choir. It is often hard to judge! My role is to encourage and inspire talents.

My work with young people is also very engaging. As Scouting is banned by the actual political regime (reason: it is too European!), I start groups under the patronage of saints. Saint Kizito (the youngest of the Uganda Martyrs) for boys aged 8 to 12; St. Charles Lwanga (the leader of these young Martyrs) for boys aged 13 to 18; St. Maria-Goretti for girls aged 8 to 12; and Saint Bernadette for girls aged 13 to 18. The activities are quite similar to those of the Scout and Girl Guide movements. But to better adapt the method to the African context, aided by responsible adults for each group, I write in the local language some booklets of activities and meetings; one booklet for each group, and one for the adult counsellors.

We also try to encourage young people, especially the older ones, to deepen their knowledge in order to cultivate the land better. Together with their parents, we invite representatives

from the local Ministry of Agriculture Office to provide advice on how to produce better crops. Malawi is an agricultural country and the soil is very fertile. From an early age, children help their parents with farming.

"Moni Amai!"

In this first Parish, I am fortunate to have a good parish priest who is also the one in charge of our local White Father community. There are three of us (as our 'rule of three' prescribes): the parish priest is German, the first curate is a Dutchman four years my senior, and myself. Our parish priest is a little conservative, and he insists that we wear our *gandoura*³ when we go out to administer the sacrament of the sick. One day, I cycle to the home of an old lady who is very ill, and I travel on a small path through a village with no Christians yet. The children greet me in full voice: "*Moni, Amai!*" (Hello, Sister!). With this long white robe, they think I am one of the MSOLAs!

My father's Death

On December 27, 1971, I see a cyclist arriving from the post office in Mtakataka, about 10 km from Mua. He hands me a telegram telling me of the death of my father, who has been ill for some time. So, I drive to the Post Office to call my mother. We talk, we cry and we pray together. The next day, the burial will take place. In those days, there is no question of going to the funeral. I have to wait for my first leave four

³ Arabic word meaning cassock; it is a kind of white soutane worn by the Arabs of North Africa where we were founded wear.

years later, in July 1975, to go to my father's grave. Today, the ease of communication and travel makes such situations very different.

A river that changes its course

In 1972, with people from the surrounding villages, I build a small church in Chimpikizo, 15 kilometers from Mua. The location is carefully chosen (we think!) with the advice of the local people. Unfortunately, a year later, during a season of torrential rains, the river changes its course and completely floods the church which begins to sink! There is no way to save it! After a few months, it is nothing but ruins. Only a few years later will it be rebuilt on solid higher ground!



Easter Vigil in Malawi

MY SECOND PARISH: DEDZA

In my second parish, I continue the same work, but also, I visit the two high schools in the vicinity of this small town, and the Malawi College of Forestry, about ten kilometers away.

Legion of Mary

The parish priest asks me to become chaplain of the Legion of Mary. At first, I am a little hesitant, thinking that it is a group made up only of over-pious women, doing no concrete action for the needy. But soon I realize I am wrong. First, there are a few men in the groups; then, I see that every week, members engage at the social level by visiting the sick and helping the poor materially and morally. In addition, I quickly notice that several catechumens discovered the Christian faith thanks to the discreet influence of the Legionaries! Throughout the two intensive years of catechumenate, candidates for baptism are supported and encouraged by members of the Legion of Mary. Moreover, many of these future baptized choose their godparents among the members of the Legion. These legionaries are true apostles!

"He sent them two by two..." (Luke 10:1...)

During a weekend retreat for the members of the parish YCW, Sister Bedet and I decide to make these young men and women think about the apostolic nature of their mission as young workers. We make them meditate on the text of St Luke 10, verses 1 to 20, where Jesus sends his apostles two by two to evangelize; and they come back full of joy!

Likewise, we send them two by two in the small town of Dedza, where they should contact people they meet, and tell them simply about Jesus and His Good News. They are a little fearful at first, but eventually they go. Towards the end of the afternoon, they come back all joyful and narrate their experience! During the Mass, they offer a flower for each person they have contacted.

African winters

In Canada, I am often told, "You are used to the heat of Africa!" When you have not lived there, you do not realize that there are big temperature differences on the African continent, and also depending on the different seasons. The first time I realize these discrepancies, is when I move from Mua, down in the valley near Lake Malawi, to go up to Dedza, my second parish, high in the mountains . A few days after my arrival, I sleep two nights in the sacristy of the Kapesi church, while I am on a pastoral visit. Despite my sleeping bag, I still feel cold! So, I add some Mass vestments on top in order to warm myself up! In the parish itself, we often lit a fire in the hearth of the living room, especially from May to August!

Later, in South Africa, I will see snow on the Drakensberg Mountains. There are also two or three places where roads become impassable because of snowstorms! There is even a ski resort in Lesotho, a small independent country surrounded by South Africa!

Eating a whole cow... on Good Friday!

I am again in Kapesi, but this time for the Easter Triduum. Arrived on Holy Thursday, I will return to the parish on Easter Sunday afternoon. On Friday mornings at 5 o'clock, a knock at the door of the sacristy wakes me up. I am told that the paramount chief of this huge village of a thousand Catholic families died in the night. Since the body cannot be kept for long, the funeral will be at 2 pm today. I tell the catechist and other leaders that we shall have to hurry up, because at 3 pm it will be the funeral of Jesus; it is Good Friday.

So, in the early afternoon, I pray with this huge crowd who loved their good chief, and we lay him to rest. Around 3:30 pm, as I prepare to go get ready for the Good Friday prayer, the catechist tries to convince me to stay and eat. They killed a cow to feed the villagers and all those who came from all around. I tell the catechist that I have to go prepare for the Lord's funeral, and that they must move quickly to get to the church 'not too late'. He is not convinced, because people are still here and they will be disappointed if I don't share in their meal. So I explain to him that I will not eat meat because it is Good Friday, but he and all the people must eat it, otherwise it will get spoiled. There is no fridge for several kilometres around. I am sure that the Lord understands and even blesses them in their generosity. The law was made for humans, not humans for the law!

Touched by grace in prison

In this large parish of Dedza, one day I climb up a mountain with the catechist to reach a small village with only a few Christians. I leave my car at the foot of the mountain with a reliable family. After an hour's walk, we arrive in the village at the top of the mountain. The scenery is beautiful! For three days, I am hosted by a family who let me stay in their little house while they sleep in their outdoor kitchen. This is the beautiful hospitality of the *Achewa* people. The only problem is that a little baby goat sleeps under the only bed, which I occupy! Occasionally, its bleating wakes me up! Besides that, everything is fine.

During the day, in the morning, I give catechism classes to adults. In the afternoon, with the catechist, I visit the families.

There is an old man who comes assiduously to the morning lessons. We visit him on the second day. He tells us his story: a few weeks ago, he got out of prison after three months, because he had not paid his taxes! During his time in prison, a priest (one of my *confrères*) celebrated Mass there every week. "But," said the old man, "one day the father read the story of a sick woman who was healed simply by touching the mantle of Jesus. I had a flu and I wanted to get out of prison. I thought that if I could touch that little piece of white bread that Christians say contains the body of Jesus, I could heal. Then I ate it, and that was it! The next day I felt much better, and two days later I got out of jail! Now I want to become a Christian!" Then the catechist enrolls him and invites him to the weekly catechism classes. After two years, our good old man is baptized, and he is very happy!

"Only princesses can be disturbed!"

During my years in the Diocese of Dedza, I also work as diocesan chaplain for high schools, the YCS, the YCW and other youth movements. I am fortunate to be helped by Sister Bernadette Bédard, MSOLA, nicknamed Bedet, as already mentioned above. I learn a lot from her. Fourteen years my senior, she really lives her missionary vocation, with wisdom and discernment. Here are two short anecdotes:

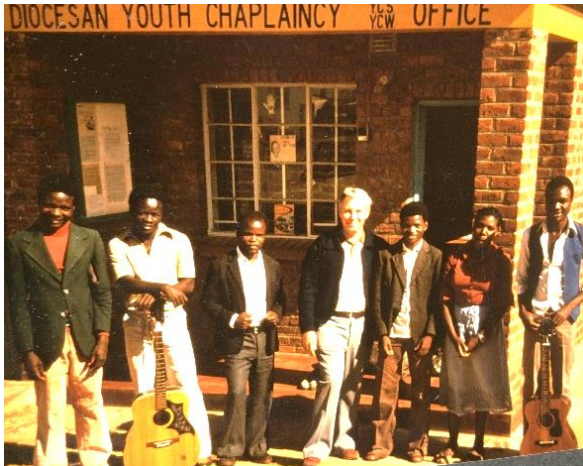
Whenever I call or visit her without warning, I say to her, "I hope I'm not disturbing?" She always answers, "Of course, not! Only princesses can be disturbed!" She never sees herself as a princess and is always willing to listen and to help.

When one of our youths gets into trouble, and I am disappointed, she encourages me by saying: "Remember the

words of the Cardinal (Lavigerie, our founder): "From fall to fall, you will lead them to the gates of paradise." To which I like to add: "Yes, and **our** failures too!"

"Don't vote for the good looking ones ! "

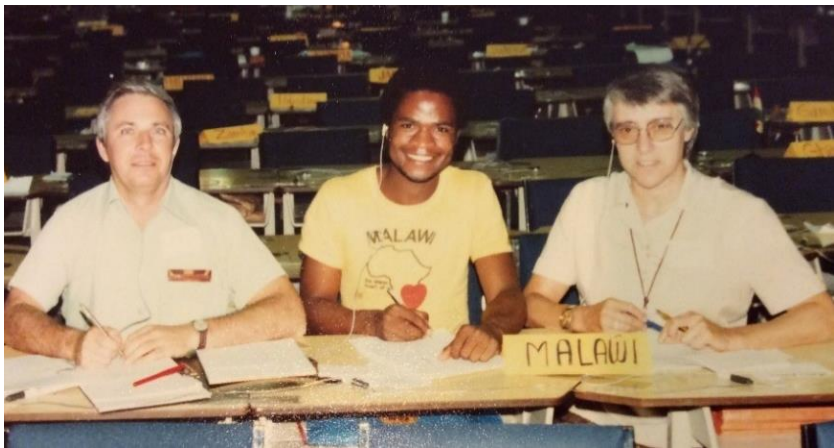
In the YCS movement, we hold elections every year for the leadership team of the diocese. I enjoy telling young people the story of my maternal grandmother during election periods. She was not really into politics and she also liked to joke. "I," she said, "like to vote for the most handsome one!" I urge young people not to imitate her: we must vote not on the looks, but by discerning the most capable and the most dedicated persons. "Look at the inner qualities, not the physical appearance!"



Diocesan Youth Office, Ntcheu, Malawi

YCS members in Malawi

When I visit a YCS section for the first time, I ask each one to introduce themselves. One says, "I am (name), president of the section"; one by one, they introduce themselves and add their office title: vice-president, secretary, treasurer, team leader... When it comes to the other ones' turn, some introduce themselves as 'simple members'. I then invite them to use a more positive formula and introduce themselves as an 'important member'! Smiling, they start again, saying, "I am (name), an important member of the YCS!"



**With Sr. Bernadette and Patrick, a YCS leader,
at the World Council**

MY THIRD PARISH: NTCHEU

In Malawi, my third parish is located on the main road, halfway between the political capital of Lilongwe and the industrial city of Blantyre.

Mass celebrated in civilian clothes

One Sunday morning, after a first Mass at the parish church, I go with the Catechist for a second celebration in a country chapel about 30 kilometres away. When I open my Mass kit, I find out the vestments are missing; I forgot to put them back in their place after I had them washed.

In the Church, there are some very narrow-minded people about dress protocol for liturgical celebrations. So, not wanting to scandalize anyone, I ask the catechist to probe people's opinions. While I am busy hearing confessions, he explains the situation to them. Then he reports the following: "The women asked if there is bread and wine; to which I replied 'yes'." "Then let Father celebrate Mass!" they said. The men added: "It's already quite late! Let Father proceed!"

These simple people, especially the women, go to the essential of the Eucharistic mystery! What a beautiful common sense! So, I celebrate, dressed in civilian clothes! Did Jesus wear all kinds of special and sophisticated clothes at the Last Supper?

Leaflet on the Apocalypse

The most difficult book to understand in the Bible is probably the one found at the very end: the Apocalypse, more fittingly called the Book of Revelation. Seeing the difficulties of our people to handle this book and the misinterpretation that some sects make of it, thus bringing a lot of confusion, I decide to write in Chichewa a very simple leaflet on this mysterious book.

Always keeping in mind that a "text out of context is a pretext", I explain in this leaflet the symbolism of numbers,

colours, body parts, animals, etc. Many parishioners buy it for a token. This little ‘masterpiece’ becomes so popular, that even some pastors of local sects come to buy some copies! We must do many reprints!

Interesting Parish

Ntcheu is situated half-way between Blantyre, the industrial capital and Lilongwe, the political capital. It is exactly on the side of the main highway, fifty metres off the road. Therefore, we have many visitors. Our parishioners are very devoted and active in the parish life.

As I am busy with the diocesan youth chaplaincy, the school visits throughout the diocese, and for a two year period as national YCS chaplain, I work only part time in the parish as such. Two *confrères* are full time in the parish pastoral work.

Therefore, I do not report much on the parish activities, but here and there in this book, you can find some anecdotes which have their origins in this beautiful parish.

WITCHCRAFT

Witchcraft is still very much alive in Africa, and even in our occidental countries. Human beings need to rely on superior forces. When faith in God is not deep enough, they embark on the mysterious and the taboo.

Amulets and fear

One day, in a large parish, a young woman comes to see me: she is tormented because of amulets and talismans of all kinds brought back from her village. The elders and chiefs of the village forced her to take these objects that are supposed to bring her happiness and prosperity, which is quite the opposite! After discussion and prayer, she is convinced to get rid of these objects, despite the fear of being reprimanded and even punished if her family comes to know.

So we go to her apartment. I pick up all these various objects (roots, dried leaves, feathers from birds of prey, dried hen's paws, rhino claws and teeth, and parts from other wild animals). I fill half a garbage bag and put it outside. Then we pray and bless the apartment. I go back to the parish with the bag and burn all these objects in a big barrel where we destroy trash. Since that day, this lady lives in peace and quiet.

Two bird wings

One early Sunday morning, before anyone has arrived for the first Mass, I go to the outdoor notice board to put up some news bulletins. It is a soft board covered with a glass door and locked. To my surprise, I find two bird of prey wings nailed to the notice board inside! In many African traditions, this is a sign of witchcraft; someone wants to cast a bad spell! The glass door was not forced; I do not see any sign of infraction! How did these two wings get there? So I unlock the glass door and remove them; there is still dried blood on them. I post my newsletter, close the door and lock it. Then, after showing

these two wings to my *confrères*, I burn them. We agree not to tell anyone.

Afterwards, nothing strange happens: no incident, no accident, no misfortune. But I still wonder: who put those two wings in the notice board? How did he do it? Was he a master locksmith? In any case, there are no consequences, and no one in the parish will ever mention anything about it!

Vaudoo

In 1986, I am in Ottawa for a mission and vocation awareness service. With the help of my *confrères* and other religious congregations, I put on a musical play called *Jusqu'à Quand?* to commemorate the centenary of the Martyrs of Uganda. Among the actors, there is one who constantly claims a salary. I tell him again and again that I have a very small budget, just enough to give everyone some transportation allowance and, later, to cover the cost of food during the performance tours.



**Sorcerer in the musical play
*Jusqu'à Quand?***

One day, this young man comes to see me in my office and he starts with the same request; my answer remains the same. Then he suddenly jumps to his feet, and with a threatening finger, shouts at me: "Listen! I'm a *vaoodoo* priest, and I'm going to cast a spell on you and your actors! You'll see!" I immediately spring to my feet and tell him with a firm voice: "Listen! I'm a Catholic priest, and I'm not afraid of a *vaoodoo* priest! And now that's enough! Goodbye! And God help you!"

We find a substitute to play his role, and rehearsals resume. I do not tell the actors anything about the incident because they would be afraid. It is often fear that makes witchcraft have power over people. After 20 performances across Quebec and francophone eastern Ontario, we hold a farewell party, and at the end I tell them the whole story! They are stunned; some are visibly scared. So I tell them: "Nothing bad has happened to us, no accidents, no incidents, and we had great audiences everywhere! Before each trip and before each show, we prayed. You can see God is greater than all evil spirits!"

This young man was never seen again by any member of the troop! He has completely vanished!

"But you, Father Michael, you are a witch!"

Every year, in Dedza parish, we have between 100 and 150 baptisms of adults and young people, following two years of catechumenate. During the three weeks prior to baptism, all gather at the parish for an intense period of concrete deepening of their faith in an atmosphere of prayer and reflection.

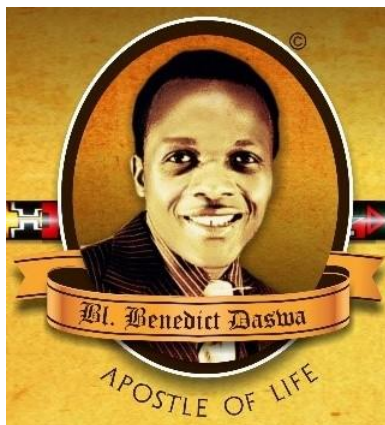
On the first morning of one of these sessions, a young teenager who faithfully followed the two years' catechism, is missing. So, in the afternoon, I go to his house, not too far from the parish. His father is a hardened animist who has three wives. When he sees me, he gets angry and says, "You're not going to baptize my son!" Furious, he comes forward and wants to hit me; but his three wives restrain him. I tell him I have no intention of forcing his son to be baptized, because it should be a personal decision. Then I politely leave him.

A week later, I meet him walking on the roadside. I greet him, and he tells me, "But you, Father Michael, you are a witch! As soon as you left my home, I started to be sick, and only this morning did I get up feeling a bit better! And now I meet you! You must have cast a spell on me!" I then explain to him that illness can come at any time and that, on the contrary, I prayed for him and his family. Then I tell him, "The sun is strong and you're not wearing a hat. You might get sick again!" So I give him an old hat I always keep on my car seat. He is happy, and since then he tells all his friends that Father Michael is a witch, but a good one! His son receives baptism the following year with his father's consent.

Blessed Benedict Daswa

On September 13, 2015, Pope Francis' envoy comes to South Africa and beatifies Benedict Daswa. A family man and school principal, involved socially and committed in his parish, he dies on 2 February 1990, killed by villagers because he refused to take part in witchcraft. He is only 43 years old. In 2016, I visit his home village and his 93-year-old mother. I meet some of his children and grand-children whom he

himself never had a chance to know. You can read his story in more details if you visit benedictdaswa.org.za



The author with the mother, two daughters and two grand-children of Benedict Daswa

RACISM...

CHILDREN

Children are not born racist. Let us learn from their openness. Therefore, I join these two themes together.

What color is God's skin?

In 1967, during my first year of theology in Ottawa, I have the chance to attend a beautiful concert by the American choir *Up With People*. One of their songs, *What Colour is God's Skin?*, has always served me in the various places where I have worked. Only a few months after that concert, I have the opportunity to use it for the first time. Indeed, after the school year, with two fellow-seminarians, I spend two months in Buffalo, New York state, in a large parish located in the heart of a huge African-American ghetto. The goal is to improve our English and to live a pastoral experience in a completely different environment. As future missionaries, it is important to live in such areas.

As we are the only whites in the neighbourhood, the parish priest asks us to wear a clerical collar to identify us as members of the parish staff. It makes us look like young priests! One day as I am doing house to house parish visitation, some young boys greet me by calling me 'preacher'. I stop for a chat. One of the smartest asks me: "God, what color is he?" I return the question to them, and one replies: "I don't know!". The second goes on: "He's white!" A third adds: "God has no color." So I sing for them my theme song. *What Color is God's Skin?* (see the lyrics in the appendix); they soon join in the chorus.

It soon becomes the song I like to perform and teach everywhere. I know it by heart in English and French. Everywhere I go, I like to promote this song: in Malawi, in schools and with youth groups; with our choirs in Kenya (where we also sing it for tourists in some Mombasa hotels),

in Canada, and especially in South Africa. Yes, in that country recovering too slowly from so many years of the apartheid regime, this song is very appreciated. I often sing it at the end of Sunday Masses, with people joining in. Many ask for the lyrics and the music; and even the Catholic School Boards of the archdioceses of Johannesburg and Pretoria (South Africa) ask for it to use in their religious classes. After a mass on a Sunday morning, a lady says to me, "This song should be promoted all over South Africa!" Following this remark, I produce 700 copies of a CD (along with a few other songs with a vocation theme) which I sell in parishes, schools and at various meetings. Following several violent riots due to xenophobia, we print and distribute more than 60,000 copies of a photo of two children, a Black and a White, hugging each other, on which is written: "Only one race: the human race." With permission from the *Up With People* group, we print the lyrics on the back of the photo.

I hope that this song has made a breakthrough, conveying a message of harmony and good understanding among different races.

British Airways Against Racism

One day, on a British Airways flight from Johannesburg Airport, preparations are taking place to travel to London. The flight will last eleven hours. A White South African lady sitting next to a Black man calls a flight attendant and complains that she cannot sit next to this guy for such a long period. She requires a change of place. The hostess is uncomfortable and tells her that she is going to consult the captain. After a few minutes, she comes back and says,

"Unfortunately, the seats are all full. We have only one place left in first class. " And addressing the Black man, she says, "Sir, please follow me, you are promoted to first class." And all the travelers in the nearby seats start to applaud! A few months later, I have the chance to make the same trip with British Airways, and I ask a hostess if this really happened. She confirms that it did. There is still racism but, fortunately, there are also some open-minded people.

Children are colour blind!

Children love colours, but they do not discriminate. They are not born racist! Their innocence and spontaneity teach us a lot!

During my three years in Ottawa, one day I visit the upper grade students of an English elementary school. During coffee break, the kindergarten teacher begs me to go greet her little ones. As I enter her classroom, a little African girl I baptized a few weeks before, sees me and jumps into my arms exclaiming, "Father!" Then, one of her friends asks her: "Is this your daddy?"

Another time, in Malawi, after arriving at an outstation, 25 km from the mission, I go greet the nurse of our medical clinic. I see her 5-year-old daughter playing with a boy her age. As he is new in the village, he tells the little girl, "Look! A *mzungu*!" (a white man). And the girl replies, "No, he's not a *mzungu*! He's Father Michael." These children don't see my color, only another member of the human race.

"Let the little children come to me"

One Sunday in Nairobi, during the 5:00 pm Mass, I am preaching about the gospel of the day where Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me." (Luke 18: 16) Suddenly, a little three year old girl leaves her parents sitting on the first front bench. This little family lives next to the church, and sometimes they come for a walk on the church grounds with their child; we know each other quite well. So, the little girl boldly toddles up to me. We shake hands and say hello! People are amused and her parents are uncomfortable. I reassure them that she probably understood in her own way that Jesus is calling her! But she still walks on, crosses in front of the altar, stops between the two altar servants and climbs on the priest's chair and sits, comfortably crossing her legs! The whole assembly laughs! She sits there quietly until the end of the homily! It becomes an lively homily with the spontaneity of a child! God blesses these little ones in their innocence and simplicity; let us learn to welcome them as they are.

My niece Natalie

To follow up on the same theme, let us go back in time. It is May 24, 1969, my birthday and the day of my Missionary Oath. On the same occasion, I am ordained a deacon. During ordination, we, the future deacons, must lie down on the floor of the sanctuary, as a sign of humility and submission to God. My family is present for this triple event. As soon as she sees her uncle Michel lying face down on the floor, my niece Natalie, who is only two years old then, runs and lies on the

floor next to me! *Confrères* and visitors can hardly hold back their laughter! Simplicity and spontaneity of children! I am sure that God is laughing as well, and probably louder than all of us!



(Photo taken by my sister Ghislaine in South Africa in January 2010)



Children are colour blind! They are not born racist!



CONFESSIONS

The sacrament of forgiveness or reconciliation is not as popular as it used to be, but it still exists; and more people than we think still use it. At times it can take different forms. The most important thing is to see in it the love of God who always forgives. A psychologist friend of mine once said to me, "If you, priests, had made this sacrament evolve the right way, we, therapists, would be out of work!" Certainly, this sacrament needs reform and reformulation!

Confessions at the WYD

In 2002, I have the chance to take part in the World Youth Days (WYD) in Toronto. There are about one million young people. On Saturday afternoon, along with dozens of other priests, I help with the confessions of several young people who have come from all over the world. I am impressed to see and hear these youths confess so sincerely and with so much confidence. The Holy Spirit is surely at work! I also live a similar experience at the WYD in Sydney, Australia in 2008.

"I stole some onions!"

One day in a large African village, as I am listening to confessions, a little boy arrives. "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned..." Oh! he's got such a bad breath! He probably ate onions! So he goes on, "I stole some onions." He even brought the proof! The people of this village produce a lot of onions, potatoes, cabbages, carrots. The soil is very fertile.

General absolution

Another time, while I am hearing confessions, several children suddenly arrive; they have recently made their first communion. They line up behind the many adults waiting for their turn. It is already late; I am afraid we will not finish until nightfall, and they must go home. The next morning, it will be the Sunday Mass. Also, they are fidgeting and look tired; they must have played all day long. Therefore, I ask the adults to give me five minutes, and I call all these children in a corner of the church. I make them sing a suitable hymn, I talk about the lost sheep and guide them in an examination of

conscience, keeping their eyes closed. At each fault mentioned, I ask them to raise their hands if they have committed it, without opening their eyes. "If you've lied, raise your hand!... If you've fought, raise your hand!... If you've stolen, raise your hand..." Far from the adults, in the half-darkness, thus unfolds their confession. After asking them if they regret their sins and if they promise Jesus to try to do better, I give them the absolution. Together, we pray the *Our Father* and I dismiss them, encouraging them to do better in the future. Afterwards, I continue with the adults. Long live the simplicity of children! I pray that one day we will be able to return to the formula of general absolution. (Although not as openly as I did that day with the kids!)

Confession for two

During a stay in Canada, some good friends ask me to celebrate Mass for their fiftieth wedding anniversary. I have known them for a long time, as well as their entire family. A few days before the celebration, all family members gather at their parents' home to work on the final details of the celebration. After the evening meal, the wife says to her children and grandchildren: "After you are all gone, your father and I will have our confession with Michael; we want to get ready for Saturday!" After the family has gone, I stay alone with the couple and ask who wants to start. And she says, "Come on! We're doing this together! After 50 years of living together, do you think we don't know each other well enough to admit our faults in front of each other? Anyway, he knows mine and I know his!" What a beautiful and sincere confession of a couple who are really still in love!

Confession in Chinese

One day as I am confessing people in a large parish in Johannesburg, a young Chinese lady asks me in laborious English if she can confess using her iPhone containing a translate application that translates simultaneously into English what she says in Chinese (Mandarin or Cantonese? I wonder!). I tell her there is no problem, and she starts! The application also translates into her language what I say in English. This is the first time I hear a confession with simultaneous translation via an electronic machine! God is great to understand all these languages! And above all, he is merciful ! The lady left with a smile.

The Yellow Ribbon⁴

Coming out of his time in jail, an ex-prisoner writes to his love, asking her to tie a yellow ribbon around the "ole oak tree" in front of the house (which the bus will pass by) if she accepts him back in her life; if he does not see such a ribbon, he will remain on the bus, taking that to mean he is unwelcome and understands her reasons ("put the blame on me"). He asks the bus driver to check, fearful of not seeing anything. To his amazement, all the passengers cheer loudly – there are hundreds of yellow ribbons around the tree, a sign he is very much welcome!

⁴ "**Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree**" is a song recorded by Tony Orlando and Dawn. It was written by Irwin Levine and L. Russell Brown and produced by Hank Medress and Dave Appell. It was a worldwide hit in 1973. (From Wikipedia)

Following this theme, the youth are invited to confession. God always forgives; as a sign of this, each one is given by the priest a yellow crepe paper ribbon at the end of their individual confession. Then, if they feel they must forgive someone, they can tear a piece off the ribbon and give it to that person. After receiving her ribbon, a young girl tears a piece and gives it to me, saying: "Father, I forgive you for having shouted at me last week! " She understood well the meaning of forgiveness; and this is a humbling lesson for me!

"I feel so good! "

During a high school weekend retreat, we offer the students the chance to go to confession. On one such occasion, a teenage boy comes to me and says: "I am not a catholic, and in my Church, the pastor tells us to confess our sins directly to God. I tried it, but I don't know if God has really forgiven me. I need a sign to make sure. Can I confess to you, Father?"

I therefore invite him to make an act of faith in God who is a loving and forgiving Father. Then he says in his own words how he feels about God's love and forgiveness for him and he names his sins. I pray then, asking God to forgive this boy who has showed his love and trust toward Him, as a real faithful son.

The next morning, the boy comes to me and says: "Thank you, Father! I feel so good now! I feel free! "

ABORTION

Abortion is a hotly debated topic in Western countries, and often a taboo in Africa. I sincerely believe that all life is sacred: we must protect it from conception to death. I am not only pro-birth, but also pro-life.

Magda

One day, I go to the Carmelite Sisters in Nairobi to buy eucharistic bread. Upon seeing me, one of the Sisters says, "Father Michael! The good Lord has sent you! In the parlour, there is a young girl talking with one of our Sisters about an abortion she wants to have tomorrow. If you can talk to her, maybe she'll listen to you." Poor girl! Only 16 years old, born of prostitution, and since the age of 12, her mother sends her out on the streets to make quick money from any man she meets. Her appointment with an abortionist is tomorrow afternoon. After talking with her, I invite her, if she wants, to come and watch a movie tomorrow morning. Indeed, Sister Ruth, an Irish missionary who runs the parish sewing school, asked me to install the video camera to show a film to her students then. This film is called *The Silent Scream*, and it graphically describes how an abortion is performed; it shows, among other things, the baby's silhouette, his mouth wide open, groaning in pain. I tell her that she will be welcome and no one will notice her among the 100 girls of the sewing school. After seeing the film, she will be free to decide. I also explain to her about the help she will be offered. I have little hope she will come, but I leave it in God's hands.

The next day, she arrives at the parish at least ten minutes before the movie. I introduce her to Sister Ruth who takes her to the hall where her students are getting ready for the film. I start the video projector and go back to my office. After the presentation, she comes to see me and she bursts into tears: "I want to keep my baby, she says, but how do I do it?" So, with her consent, I make an appointment for her with some Sisters

who take care of pregnant girls. During her eighth month of pregnancy, the Sisters receive her with great affection and empathy. She stays there until the second month after the birth. Sometime later, she has her baby boy christened with the name Michael!

Rolanda

One day, a fifteen-year-old girl comes to my office to ask me for "permission to have an abortion"! I explain to her that she is asking the wrong person: as a Catholic Christian, I tell her, this goes against our gospel values on respect for life. Rolanda is already in her fifth month. I also explain that it is very risky for her to have an abortion at this advanced stage of her pregnancy. After a long discussion and a prayer, sobbing, she decides to keep her child. I send her to meet the Sisters who take care of pregnant girls. She then has the joy, like Magda in the previous story, to carry her pregnancy to term and give birth to a beautiful baby girl!

Mother, let me live!

One day, I get a phone call from the Kenya National Catholic Secretariat. I am asked to attend a meeting to prepare ourselves to challenge a 'Pan-African Conference on Adolescent



Health', a euphemism hiding a completely different reality. Looking at the sponsors and partners of this pan-African congress, we see that it has a hidden agenda: the purpose is to promote contraception and abortion among young people. At

the National Secretariat meeting, there are professionals in education, psychology, medicine, etc. Knowing that our parish has a group of dynamic and talented young people, they ask me to organize something to peacefully, but firmly, counterbalance the ideas that will be conveyed there.

The conference takes place in a chic Nairobi hotel; we cannot afford to register with full residential service, but I sign up for the convention, without residence at the hotel. On the first evening, I take a dozen young people, and our musicians start playing and singing during the cocktail party. At one point, two 10 and 12 year old girls perform an anti-abortion song that pretty much says this, *"Mother, let me live, I want to live my life, Mother, let me live; when you hold me in your arms, you'll fall in love with me!"* The organizers are not happy, but the participants seem very touched by the message. Our band continues to play popular tunes. Then, Al, the president of our youth group, announces that now Laura will declaim a poem she composed. Laura won the first prize in a poetry and declamation competition among all high schools in Nairobi. The crowd listens very attentively as she delivers by heart and with lots of emotion an anti-abortion poem she wrote the previous days. Before the event, she showed me the text, but I realize now that she is spontaneously adding a few details, including "the assassinated Mozart" and "you murderers!", while pointing at the conference organizers, noticeably enraged! The next day, with Al and a young lady, we return to the Conference, but after stopping at a local printing house where my friend, CEO of the company, reproduces a hundred and fifty copies of the song and the poem used the evening before. We arrive fifteen minutes

before the opening of the session and we place one of these papers on each of the participants' desks in the conference hall. Arriving at their place, they find a copy they can read and meditate on! The next two days take place amidst some felt tension between the pro-choice and pro-life factions.⁵

Abortion and its consequences

One day, a young woman tells me that she has a very big problem on her conscience; she wants to talk to me alone in my office. After a long moment of hesitation, she tells me she has had eight abortions! She is really traumatized and wants to do away with this guilt feeling. I talk to her of God's infinite and merciful love. But I tell her that if she really wants to feel free from her remorse, she should go for therapy. She tells me that she feels really uncomfortable and ashamed to tell someone else, counsellor or psychotherapist. We pray together, and then I suggest to her to go through a simple and technically easy therapeutic exercise. I have read about the subject and I understand that no woman can go through an abortion, let alone eight, and come out unscathed. According to objective psychologists, all women, without exception, are marked negatively for life, sometimes physically, but always emotionally. Here is, in substance, what those professionals say: a post-abortion syndrome can result in fear, intense guilt, depression, loss of self-esteem or self-control. It is a

⁵ The term *pro-life* is not always adequate; some people are pro-birth without caring for the rest of the child's life. If you are pro-life, you must defend life all the time, from womb to tomb.

psychological dysfunction coming from a very traumatic experience.

So I suggest this to her: first, I ask her to go home to write a letter to each of the aborted children. If she knows the gender, she can give it a name, or a neutral name if she does not know, in order to make the exercise as personal as possible. After two weeks, she returns and reads all these letters, one by one, in an audible voice. She wrote that she is sorry and asks forgiveness from each of these children and tells them how much she loves them. It is really moving and very emotional; in a trembling voice, she nevertheless manages, through her sobs and tears, to read all the letters. Then, we go to the rectory backyard where we burn these letters, while praying that the Lord will take care of these little angels and show their mother that they have already forgiven her. We all belong to the great family of the communion of saints.

In her second homework, for the following two weeks, she writes a letter to each of the men who got her pregnant. As she is reading, I perceive a lot of anger, but at the end of each letter she expresses her forgiveness in the name of Jesus. Then we repeat the same ritual: we burn the letters and pray.

In a third step, she writes to each person who encouraged her to have those abortions. Then, we follow the same ritual.

In a fourth step, it is a letter to each abortionist for not telling her the whole truth about the consequences of an abortion.

In a fifth step, she writes a letter to God to thank him for his forgiveness.

Finally, in a sixth and final step, she writes a letter to herself, which is the most difficult: forgiving oneself is not always easy! But she manages to express beautiful positive thoughts. This time, she wants to keep this letter so that she can re-read it as many times as necessary to achieve lasting inner peace. After a few months, she tells me that she burned this last letter, after reading it several times. She has now found peace and serenity in her life. What has become of her? I do not know. I lost track of her. I entrust her to the Lord.

SINGING

MUSIC

THEATRE

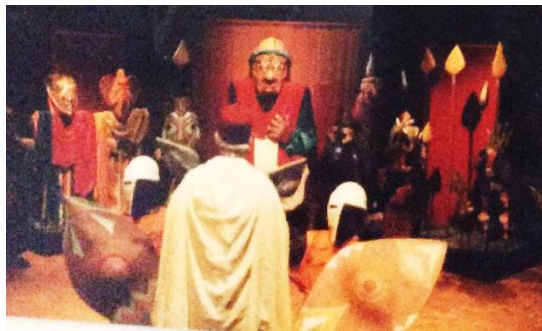
I have always loved singing, music and theatre. Already, while studying theology, I was interested in liturgical music and singing. I learned to play the guitar to accompany songs.

Youth choir

Between 1966 and 1970, I am at the scholasticate (seminary) in Vanier, Ottawa. I get involved in the nearby parish of Saint-Charles. We form a youth choir and start a lively Mass. Every Sunday, with around thirty young people, we live up a Mass celebration: it attracts many people, especially the youths. At first, adults are a little taken aback, but they quickly get used to it. Some even say they love it! We quickly find talents among the youths themselves: guitarists, percussionists, pianists and soloists. A good spirit reigns in the group, and friendships are created. As the years go by, some even get married and start families. Until today, I am still in touch with some of them, and I enjoy meeting them during my visits in Ottawa.

Jusqu'à quand? (Until When?)

As mentioned in the section on Witchcraft, in the subparagraph *Voodoo*, in 1986, we put on a great show commemorating the centenary of



From the musical *Jusqu'à Quand?*

the Martyrs of Uganda. We finance this musical play through various donations from benefactors and sympathetic donors. I am grateful to all, especially to the Sisters of Charity of Ottawa (Grey Nuns) who, apart from their cash donations,

take care of sewing all the costumes and sets. Then there is good Brother Jean of the Christian Brothers who builds a portable theatre, mountable and removable in a snap; and *confrères* of my Ottawa community who assist me materially and morally. Also, a car rental company lends us, for five weekends a 16-seater van and a small truck to transport our equipment. I must also mention the Department of Plastic Arts of the Université du Québec à Hull (now the *Université du Québec en Outaouais*, UQO) which allows two of their students to work in their workshop to produce huge African masks.



Small Kizito and King Mwanga
(from *Jusqu'à Quand?*)

One evening, after a performance, two theatre professionals and members of the Union of Artists, ask me how much we have spent for this show. Thinking the amount was too high, I reply shyly: "Around \$35,000."⁶ "What?" said one of them, "only that? For us, such a show would have cost three times as much!" At the end of the performances, with donations and

⁶ Unless specified, in this book, the sign \$ indicates Canadian dollars.

ticket sales, we reap a profit of \$7,000 which we send to Uganda for missionary work.

African Jigsaw⁷

In Nairobi, Our Lady Queen of Peace, in South B, is a very lively parish, and I soon realize that the youths love music and theatre. After presenting a few variety shows revealing their talents, and with the agreement of my *confrères*, we decide to put up a musical play about the problems of rapid urbanization and the unbridled growth of cities in Africa. Martin, a Kenyan and future M.Afr., introduces me to a beautiful theatrical and musical work: *African Jigsaw* becomes a major musical show. Songs, music and actions illustrate the theme of the exodus from the countryside to the city. It describes the difficult situation of young people who, filled with dreams, lose their traditional values in the city. More than a hundred youths, aged 7 to 30, become the singers and actors. Thanks to donations from benefactors, we already have two electronic pianos, three electric guitars, tam-tams and a good sound amplification system. We also install a lighting system with different color lights activated by a series of rheostats. We get a very substantial donation from the WWF (World Wildlife Fund) from England, which wants to encourage the promotion of this show. Therefore, we can improve the stage and widen the front platform, as well as create beautiful costumes made in our sewing school.

Some friends from Ottawa come to visit (see the chapter on Visitors) and already the first day, they have the chance to

⁷ Musical Play written by Peter Rose and Anne Conlon.
(<http://www.roseconlonmusic.co.uk>)

attend the dress rehearsal; the first song invites them to fulfill their dreams by discovering Africa, a continent of surprises, wonders and challenges. The second song welcomes them to Africa in a grandiose display of a giant map of the continent and the flags of 35 African countries paraded in front of them by some of the young actors. Despite some negative aspects of urban life in Africa, illustrated in the rest of the show, my two visitors are blown away!

After closing the series of performances, we take a time of reflection to discern the main messages emerging from this show. Among the questions discussed, I ask the young actors and actresses which of the 21 songs they prefer. Almost unanimously, they answer "*Mothers of Africa*" which describes the pain of mothers seeing their sons and daughters going into exile in the big city and not returning home, either for the sake of gain, or because they were killed by rival gangs, or enslaved in prostitution. Young people are touched by this song more than others which are much more lively and inviting to dance, "... because, they say, this song is about our situation here in Nairobi."

***ROCK NATIVITY*⁸**

Following the resounding success of African Jigsaw, we undertake another production. Starting in August, we hold auditions for all the interested youths. Tony, a young adult from the parish, is amazing to discover talents. Sometimes I go to the parish hall to listen. When I tell him, "But this boy

⁸ Book & lyrics by David Wood: Music by Tony Hatch and Jackie Trent.
See: www.guidetomusicaltheatre.com/shows_r/rock_nativity.htm



A scene from *African Jigsaw*

is tone deaf! He will never make it!" he replies, "Father, leave him to me; I'll take care of him." He makes him do voice exercises, and most of the time he manages to get something good out of the few young people who seem unable to hold the right note. In general, Africans have a very good musical ear, but less so in urban areas. Could it be due to the noise and the constant commotion of big African cities - as in Western countries, for that matter?

An English *confrère* has just joined our community. He worked for several years in rural Tanzania. Ted finds that here in Nairobi there is not enough African authenticity. "It's too artificial! It is like Europe!" he complains. When I invite him to the dress rehearsal of Rock Nativity, he accepts reluctantly, saying: "Ah! it's all in English, and written by English people!"



Sandra, our youngest performer

But after the show, he says enthusiastically: "Yes, it's in English, but performed in a nice African way! I like it!" Afterwards, he attends a few other representations!

After producing this show two years in a row, we put up *Scrooge* (from the play "*A Christmas Story*" by Charles Dickens). It's a good show, but at the youths' request, the following year we return to *Rock Nativity*.

Having lost our Kenyan music director for family reasons, I find a music teacher who works at one of Nairobi's best schools. She is from England and has already put on the same show in her home parish before coming to Kenya as a volunteer. Our young people already know the songs, but she is amazed to see the energy and enthusiasm in performing songs, dances and choreographies. "In my parish, she says, it was much slower and more subdued!"

Another interesting detail about this young music teacher: she loves chocolate! During the shows, I always keep a reserve, and when I see her tired, I discreetly drop a small piece of chocolate near her keyboard, and she surges back to life!

A few years after my arrival in Toronto, in May 1998, I have the pleasure to be invited to bless her wedding in England. What a joy to see her again and to meet her husband, himself a great musician and opera singer.

Christmas Concert in a large shopping mall...

On the first weekend of December, in a large shopping mall in the heart of Nairobi, we give a concert using the *Rock Nativity* songs. The *Yaya Shopping Centre* is very well located and teeming with people doing their Christmas shopping;

many are foreign workers. Our young people perform brilliantly, and many shoppers stop to listen and watch; yes, they also look because our singers accompany their songs with appropriate gestures and dances. I walk slowly through the crowd, and sometimes I stop to capture the spectators' reactions. I hear various comments, including this one from a lady to her friend: "It's so beautiful and very alive! I've been in Kenya for two years, and I've never heard such a beautiful Christmas choir!" During these musical events, we distribute flyers inviting people to come to the performance in the parish.

... and in the street

At the youth leaders' initiative and for advertising purposes, we offer a free concert on *Biashara* Street (Swahili for 'business') on the first Friday night of December. With the cooperation of the police, we close a section of the street. It is a very busy place, and our entertainment attracts a lot of people who come to do their Christmas shopping. We carry our portable theatre and sound equipment which we connect at the store of a benevolent merchant on this street; our show brings him customers! We distribute our flyers announcing our next performances in our parish hall. At the same time, this is an opportunity to evangelize on the street.

Our guests of honour

For each performance, we have guests of honour who come with some donation for our KWETU Home of Peace, a drop-in Centre for Street Children (see the chapter Street Children). Among them, we receive the High Commissioners of the

United Kingdom and of Canada, the Ambassadors of the United States and of the Czech Republic, the East Africa CEO of the Gestetner Company (who prints free posters, flyers, tickets and librettos) and the CEO of a major multinational company.

Advertising by our guests

These special guests normally come with their families, colleagues and friends. Every year, the Canadian High Commission gives us a good advertisement: in the December issue of their little magazine *The Eager Beaver*, they invite all their readers to go see the show. A lady from their Office even writes something like this: "Since I've been in Africa, in December I don't feel the Christmas atmosphere; but as soon as I attend the *Rock Nativity* show, I find back the Christmas spirit!"

Touched for life

One day, after a performance, the Provincial Superior of the MSOLA, who is visiting their local community, tells me: "This show is magnificent and of exceptional catechetical quality! These young people will forget all your homilies, but they will never forget what they went through in this concert and the teaching it carries!"

For example, in the official text of *Rock Nativity*, at one point, we read this remark: "The following song may be omitted to respect the sensitivity of the local people." This song, entitled *What Game Are You Playing, Lord?*, puts in Mary's mouth some surprising words for one who believed the message of the angel Gabriel. Upon learning that King

Herod wants to kill all the boys aged two and under, and realizing that she and Joseph must escape to Egypt with their newborn, she sings that she does not understand God: "He thinks he's so good, how can he allow that?" she says. She adds: "Are you really there? How can we believe in you?" These words seem rebellious, especially coming from Mary! But faith is not that simple; it is normal to have doubts... However, after Herod's death, following the message of the angel Gabriel to Joseph, Mary sings: "Now I understand... I will give my whole life to God and live, live, live... open my heart, open my mind..." This song shows that Mary was human and that she also could become anxious about God's surprising methods. Often in life, we may question God's ways, but he is always in control and has the last word.

He attends all twelve presentations!

A ten-year-old Muslim boy, who lives close to the church, wants to join the concert, but his father categorically refuses. It is very sad, but he is happy to attend each of the twelve performances! The young attendants at the ticket counter know his story, and they let him in free of charge.

There is also a special *matinée* show for street children on a Saturday afternoon. The leaders must search them at the entrance to make sure they do not have drugs, alcohol or sharp objects.

Learning from their mistakes

When the youths produce their Christmas musical, they charge an entrance fee to pay for the production and help the KWETU Home of Peace with the small profits. After a few

years of musical plays, the quality of their productions has improved considerably. The youth leaders therefore decide, despite my objections, to extensively raise the cost of the tickets. They say: "If we ask too little for the tickets, people will think that the quality of our show has not improved; if we charge more, they will think it is certainly better than the previous years, and more people will come." I object in vain. In my pedagogical approach, I always tell them that I will veto only if their project goes against faith or morality. I try to convince them: it is better to put a reasonable cost for tickets and have a full house, than to impose a high cost and end up with few spectators. But they must decide by themselves; let them learn from their mistakes! They double the ticket price, and for the first performance, on a Thursday night, there are only forty spectators in the parish hall that can hold four hundred people! The next evening, only about fifty! Remembering the crowds of the previous years when the admission price was much lower, the leaders come to see me on Saturday morning. Timidly, they ask to announce at the end of all Masses that the admission price is cut in half ! At all the following performances, crowds fill the hall! What a good lesson!

Christmas show on TV

In Nairobi, the national television channel KBC wants to shoot a film with our youth choir in order to present a Christmas show. Our youths are well prepared and are excited about the prospect of appearing on national television. On the morning of the recording in our parish hall, our young presenter is sick. What to do? Each song must be introduced

briefly and we all rely on her for the presentation of the show. The leaders come up with a good idea: ask Regina! Yes, she is a wonderful 17-year-old girl, but since she is a boarder at a high school far from Nairobi, she was unable to take part in the rehearsals.

And does she even know the content of the show? Is she able to improvise at the last minute? Some of her friends say they have already briefed her, explaining everything about the show, since the beginning of the holidays (in Kenya, the long holidays are in December and January). The film crew is already arriving and in the next hour, they will be ready to shoot. We must not keep them waiting! I quickly call Regina who lives nearby. She accepts the challenge! Fifteen minutes later, she arrives carrying a big bag. We give her the programme with the list of songs, and then she asks me to leave her alone in my office and call her when the technical team and choir are ready. She doesn't want to be disturbed: she wants to prepare quietly. I lock her up in the office. After 45 minutes, everything is ready. I send one of the leaders with the office key to call her. Here she is, splendidly wearing a beautiful dress matching Christmas colours! Petite, with her sunny smile, she knows how to put the whole choir at ease and she immediately conquers the hearts of the technical team! During the Christmas season, the national television will present this show three or four times. All our youths are proud of it, as well as the parishioners, especially the parents!

Santa Claus on TV

After recording this programme for the KBC, I am invited to their studio. The producer asks me to play the role of Santa

Claus in a commercial advertisement for the Panafrican Bank! I'll be given \$100 US for this service. I agree and I shall give this money to our KWETU Home of Peace. When the day comes, I go to the studio. For this role, they dress me up as Santa Claus, but they do not have any fake beard; so they use white cotton wool which they stick to my face with paper glue! After a few minutes' practice with 5 or 6 children to whom I am to give Christmas presents, we are ready to shoot. There's even artificial snow falling! In this short clip, I do not have much to say, except "Ho! Ho! Ho! Merry Christmas from Pan African Bank!" Then I sing with the children "We wish you a Merry Christmas... from Panafrican Bank!". In the following days, children from the parish who saw the commercial advert on television, tell me cheerfully, "Father Michael, we recognized you because of your voice!"

For tourists

Between Christmas and New Year's Day, we go with half of the choir (about 60 members chosen on individual merit), to Mombasa, a popular resort for European tourists. We stay near the Indian Ocean in a holiday camp belonging to the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK). Every evening we go to a different hotel where we sing for the tourists during their meal. Our choice of songs comes from *Rock Nativity* and *African Jigsaw*, but we add other traditional songs and dances in some Kenyan African languages. We also sing my theme song '*What Color is God's Skin?*'. People are really impressed. At one point in the evening, some of our youngest children take turns reciting a text in English, French, German and Italian They have practiced with the help

of a French and a German *confrère* and some Italian Sisters. Basically, here is what they say: *"Welcome to Africa... We are children from normal families, but we want to help the many street children who do not have a home. We will pass among you and invite you to be generous; your donations will help us buy food and maintain a home for children who are not as lucky as we are. Thank you! Merci! Danke Schön! Grazie!"* In general, we raise a good amount. The hotel also gives us a stipend and a little snack after the show.

"It's so boring!"

After New Year's Day, the children must wait for the new school year, which starts at the end of January in Kenya. They complain that they have nothing to do. "How boring it is!" they say. But they still have the chance to come every day to have fun and play sports in the parish hall and outside. Before the young ones go back to school, we organize a picnic in a city park. It takes place on a Saturday to allow the young workers to participate as well. We begin with a mass during which they like to sing excerpts from Rock Nativity. Since we do not bring our musical instruments, the younger ones enjoy imitating these instruments with their voices! The rest of the day is well spent with games and good food!

Jerusalem Joy!



Jerusalem Joy, written by Roger Jones⁹, is a musical play about the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. This



King Herod...

show,

...and his queen

produced entirely by a group of the parish young adults, has been on national television on Good Friday for a few years in a row. Only a piano is required, played by one of them, a very good musician whom the children have nicknamed 'magic fingers'. There are only sixteen actors/singers in all. The show lasts just under an hour, but it is very intense. The death of Jesus on the cross is truly tragic, and even one evening, while Cardinal Otunga, Archbishop of Nairobi, is the guest of honor, the crown of thorns is laid a little abruptly on the head of Al who plays the role of Jesus; the blood begins to trickle gently on his forehead. The brave actor continues to sing as if nothing has happened! Some of these rhythmic songs, others more solemn, attract a lot of young people, and we use some of them in the liturgy of Holy Week and Easter.

⁹ See: <https://open.spotify.com/album/0EMP6zgaBCs8r8VvoDRXiD>

Theme Song for a television program

A Maryknoll Missionary¹⁰ Priest founded *Ukweli Video*, a Center for producing Christian videos to promote the Gospel message. He is currently planning a series of Christian programmes to be aired on the national television channel every Sunday afternoon from 5 to 6 pm. He asks us to record the song "*God Still Loves the World*", which becomes the title and theme song of the programme. So, on Sunday afternoons, it is no longer hard to send the kids home: they all want to go see themselves on TV! And it is a reminder to the parents to watch the programme!

Compassion

Let us continue in the same vein, but in Toronto a few years later, in March 2002. We are pleased to welcome in our parish of Our Lady of the Assumption a group from Cleveland, Ohio (USA), which presents a wonderful musical performance entitled *Compassion*; it is the story of our Lord's passion, death and resurrection. There are a hundred actors/singers and musicians. They brought all their sound and light equipment and even a big theatre they build up over the altar in the sanctuary of our large church. They have transported everything in a huge trailer truck. Actors and actresses are, for the most part, parents with their children and/or grandchildren. Families in our parish provide them with lodging and food for these two days.

¹⁰ A Missionary Society founded in the USA

Following a monster advertisement, we manage to fill the church two evenings in a row: around a thousand people each time! The show, very modern in its design and interpretation, is lively and colourful. These Singers/actors, as well as the musicians, could compete with professionals. They are very successful while conveying a very beautiful Christian message during Lent¹¹.

The Lion King : the musical

Still in Toronto, while working with African communities, the famous musical play *The Lion King* plays at the Princess of Wales Theatre for almost two years. One day, I go to see the owner of the theatre, a gentleman with a reputation for being charitable. I ask him if it is possible to get free tickets for members of our African community. After all, the concept of this show has its roots in Africa, but the Africans here being mostly refugees, cannot afford such a luxury. He asks me how many tickets I need. I tell him that we have at least 150 members in the African community, but I want to focus on children and youths first. Yet, as I cannot handle transportation and babysitting for all these children, they should be accompanied by at least one parent. He then gives me 67 complimentary tickets for a Tuesday evening. Each ticket is worth \$94 ! It is a beautiful gift! In the evening, the children and youths are there with their parents. They love this show with great actions, bright colors and embellished with music, dances and songs to the tunes and rhythms of Africa!

¹¹ Visit their website: newgabrielsharp.bravesites.com

Two years later, before the show closes, I still get 35 tickets more for the newcomers of the African community! They enjoy the show as much as those of the first group! Each time, we send the generous benefactor a letter of thanks expressing our gratitude for this gift worth almost \$10,000!



Some of the musicians with the choir in Nairobi



Mary, Joseph and the choir. On the right: Herod's palace



With Carole, our music teacher, in serious rehearsal

NAIROBI

PARISH

I had always dreamed of working in a large city parish in Africa. Finally, in 1987, after three months studying the Swahili language in Tanzania, I am appointed in Kenya, in Nairobi South B at Our Lady Queen of Peace parish, which I have already mentioned above. I keep excellent memories of my seven years there.

The Goans in Nairobi

I would like to mention in a special way the Goanese in our parish of *Our Lady Queen of Peace*. They have long been the heart and soul of the smooth running of all our activities. These Asians from Goa¹² are numerous in Nairobi. Most of them have very good jobs because they are renowned for their honesty. In our South B parish, they are very committed, always ready to serve and generous. For example, one of the ladies always makes sure there are fresh flowers in the church for the Saturday and Sunday Masses. They are practicing Christians and never fail in their Sunday obligation.

They help a lot in the development of the parish, and in general they have a good relationship with the Africans. It is mostly thanks to them that we have a big and beautiful multifunction parish hall. They have played an important role in the achievement of this project. In our Parish Council several of them have occupied important functions; this has largely contributed to the development of the parish. One of them, who was our Council chairman for a few years, became a widower and later joined the congregation of the Salesians of Don Bosco.

Young delinquent?

A big city like Nairobi is awash with young people who often fall into idleness and delinquency; it is very difficult for them to find a small job to make a living. While sports and musical performances keep them busy, several other activities

¹² A state in the western part of India, evangelized by St. Francis Xavier

also attract them. Fortunately, some adults assist me well in this work with the youth.

An older teenager arrives at the parish youth club. Some of the members warn me to be wary of him: he is a real delinquent! But one of the leaders suggests that I give him a chance; this is what we decide to do. We soon give him some responsibilities, and little by little, he becomes more and more polite and kind!

Here is a proof that he used to hang around dubious circles. One day, knowing that I am expecting the visit of my mother and sister Francine, he asks me the time they are to arrive at the airport. I say: "10:30 p.m.". Then he tells me: "You will not go alone. I'll go with you. At night, sometimes, highway robbers wait for travelers, they stop their cars and rob them of everything! If there are any thieves that night, I'll know how to talk to them!" I agree to take him with me. Jokingly, I introduce him to my mother and sister as our 'bodyguard' and we drive back to the parish. Fortunately, that night, everything is quiet. Later, he becomes a much-loved leader. And now, what has become of him? A good Christian and citizen earning an honest living and who every day sends to all his former colleagues of the youth group a short text from the Bible with a few points of reflection. Did Baden Powell not say that in each one, there is at least 5% of good that we must help develop?

Club Pax

These "former young people" are now in their forties or early fifties; they are scattered all over Africa, Europe, North America, and as far away as Australia! As former members of

the youth group of Our Lady Queen of Peace in Nairobi, they founded the *Club Pax*. About 60 of them continue to be in touch with each other on a WhatsApp group; many respond to the messages of our 'former offender' with an 'Amen' or other words of benevolence. Sometimes they share various pieces of news and prayer requests for special intentions, especially on birthdays, anniversaries, deaths and school exams of their children. I have the pleasure of belonging to the group, and occasionally I send some pieces of news or some short reflections.

Young evangelizers

Some of the *Club Pax* members are co-founders of the young evangelizers team called *Reach Out*. Here is how this group started:

One evening, after the 6:00 pm Mass, I am in my office. The door is open for fresh air. A knock at the door, and a young man enters: "Father, I would like to speak to you." I ask him if it is personal and if he prefers to close the door and he says no. He then explains to me that he is troubled to see some of his friends leaving our Church to go to other churches. "We, their fellow youths, should be able to convince them that our Church meets all our needs for salvation and happiness and that they don't need to go anywhere else."

No sooner has he finished talking than a young woman about the same age knocks at the door. I come out of the office, greet her and ask her if it is personal. She replies: "I am worried about some friends who are leaving our Church and I would like to talk about it..." So I invite her to sit down, telling her that we are just discussing the same subject! The two do

not know each other personally, but have sometimes met at Mass. Indeed, in our big parish, every Sunday we have five masses with a full church! In addition, the youths have their own Mass, and they come in large numbers, between 600 and 700! We then continue our discussion, and a few minutes later, another young man arrives; I go out to greet him. He tells me he wants to talk about the same issue! Surprised, I invite him to join the discussion, and I ask all three if they have planned all this together in advance. They assure me that they do not know each other, except for having seen each other sometimes in church.

Realising the discreet work of the Holy Spirit in these three youngsters, I ask them what they think. "To form a group of young people who could go out and reach out to those who have distanced themselves, in order to help them see the full merit of being practising Catholics," is their answer. So they suggest calling their like-minded friends to a meeting in a week's time. Come the day, there are fifteen of them, aged 18 to 30, all enthusiastic: they would like to go and rekindle the faith of their companions. "But," says one of them, "are we ready? Before we go to evangelise others, we must re-evangelise ourselves!"

Thus, they decide to meet each week to share their Christian life experience in the light of the Gospel, a kind of revision of life in common. After doing this for three months, they feel ready to go on a mission! One of them gets in touch with the *Jomo Kenyatta College of Agriculture and Technology* Students' Association. He gets permission to organize an "Outreach" for a Friday evening! It's a tough day for students, who enjoy entertaining themselves at the end of a long week

of classes and study. During the two weeks before the event, I ask everyone to give me an overview of their presentation. I help them with some advice and suggest some biblical verses to support their testimony. I insist that their witness must be based on their life experience more than on doctrinal teachings.

When the day comes, we are all there with our band performing lively Christian songs while the hall fills up: 500 students! The majority are young men. Our new evangelizers are frozen behind the stage! They are scared! We pray and I reassure them that the Holy Spirit is with them. As agreed, I sit in the room among the students. I will only intervene if our young missionaries ask me, which only happens once or twice during the evening. They are well prepared.

This first experience gives them the confidence they needed. Henceforth, they visit several groups in boarding high schools, colleges and universities. They are always welcomed and leave a positive and joyful message of the Good News. Only God knows the impact.

International School of Evangelization

A year has gone by, and the *Reach Out* team feels the need to deepen its ministry and to understand better its apostolic mission. I hear about the School of International Catholic Evangelization in Germany. This school is for young people, and the courses are held in English over a period of five months. The members of the group decide to send one of them. The choice falls on Vicky who has just finished high school; she is awaiting her results in order to go to college or university. At 18 years old, she is the youngest of the group,

but she is full of enthusiasm and she prays a lot. She will represent us well.

But we need money for the trip and the session. Some benefactors provide the money for the session, but the youths must make their own effort and pay for the airfare. I meet the CEO of Lufthansa German airline; he offers us a 75% discount on the ticket price if we agree that our passenger will be put on standby at the airport. But he reassures me that at that time of year, there are always free seats. Together with all the young people of the parish, they organize fundraisers and manage to obtain the required amount.

On the day of her departure, about 50 young people with some parents gather at Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta International Airport to bid farewell to Vicky. After a long wait, she is called. To the sound of songs and drums, she goes to the check-in counter where I accompany her. Then, nervous and with a heavy heart, she disappears in the travelers' section. This is the first time she goes out of her country.

After five months of sessions and practical training in spirituality and leadership, she comes back full of new knowledge. With renewed faith, she is better equipped to convey the Gospel message. She knows how to use this new form of spiritual and evangelical life acquired among young people from several countries of the world.

Boxing Club

In Nairobi, our middle-class youths are well looked after and very committed in the parish activities. But those in the slums are more neglected. After taking the necessary steps with the uncle of one of our future Missionaries of Africa, who is

national president of the Kenya Association of Professional Boxers, he gives us a few pairs of boxing gloves and he finds for us a competent instructor. The latter teaches the boys that the goal of boxing is not to learn to fight, but to discipline themselves.

One day I am in my office and our trainee boxers are practicing in the parish hall; suddenly I hear screams and running steps. Through the window I see the young boxers chasing a boy, shouting "Thief! Thief!". Without hesitation, I run and place myself between the alleged thief and the boxers. I know this boy who just stole some pennies from the pocket of one of the boxers' trousers in the changing room. Our young pugilists insist on 'tasting a little' in a practical way the art of boxing! "No violence! I tell them; I know his parents, and I will go meet them with him." The young thief hands over the pennies he has just taken, and I send the group back to their practice. After a meeting with his parents, the repentant boy comes to apologize to the whole group and promises he will never steal again! He even joins the boxing club and becomes a friend to the other members.

Tae Kwon Do for Girls

One day in Nairobi, a woman and her 18-year-old daughter burst into my office, crying. Hysterical, the mother tells me, through her sobs, that her daughter has just been raped! After consoling them and praying, I advise them to go to the emergency room of the nearby Catholic hospital, for a medical consultation.

After explaining this incidence to my *confrères*, we agree on a concrete way to help young girls who are so vulnerable

at the hands of unscrupulous men. The next day, I meet the mother with her daughter and her younger sister, who is keen on sports and has a strong personality. I tell them that we are ready to pay for both of them a Tae Kwon Do and self-defense course, but on the condition that, after gaining enough mastery of this martial art, they will teach the other girls in the parish the basics of self-defense. They accept and join a club in the city. After a few months, they become competent enough to start teaching their friends. Many girls enroll; thus, they learn to protect themselves and to build more self-confidence.

Scouts and Guides

One day in Nairobi, a young teacher from our school located in a large slum, comes to me to suggest starting a Troop of Boy Scouts with his younger brother. Both have already done Scouting for some years. They are Protestant, but



**A Girl Guide offers a gift to
my mother and sister Francine**

very friendly and respectful towards our Church. After carefully enquiring on these two young men and consulting with my *confrères*, we agree that Scouting being a good formative movement for young people, we need to encourage them. A few days later, a mother of four daughters, comes to tell me that she would like to start a Girl Guide Company. She herself was a Guide, and with the help of her eldest daughter,

she could lead a group of young girls in this beautiful movement. My M.Afr. Community agrees, and we give them the green light.

A little later, a Canadian couple sent by the government to work in Kenya, offers a space in their container which they will receive in Nairobi in a few months. Immediately I write to the Christian Brothers in Ottawa, who generously agree to buy camping tents, and ship them in the container. Our young Scouts and Guides go camping for at least a few days during the school holidays. Every year the Boy Scouts go camping for a week and the Girl Guides as well organise their own camp. Living a few days in nature is a physical and spiritual enrichment for them, accustomed as they are to living in one of Nairobi's largest slums.

It is hard to assess the good generated by these youth movements. But I believe it is not lost time and energy. One day I receive a message from a former Girl Guide, telling me she is now studying to become a Social Worker in order to go help with slum dwellers; she herself grew up in such a milieu and was changed by her Girl Guide experience.

Beauty pageant

About 100 of our youths go to a nearby parish for a day long rally. At one point, the leaders of the host parish announce that there will be a beauty contest. Each parish group must choose their two most beautiful girls and present them the way they do in beauty contests seen on TV. Fearing that some teenage girls will react badly if they are not selected, I suggest that the leaders choose the two youngest ones. Precisely, there are two who always follow their big sisters;

they are 8 and 9 years old. The older girls teach them the special fashion show catwalk and, when the time comes, the two little ones walk around the stage and provoke a lot of laughter and shouts of joy in the youthful crowd! And guess what! One of them wins the second prize! A good lesson in childlike simplicity. Inner beauty is more important and is often reflected on the outside.

Holy Thursday: "a gift for our priests"

On a Holy Thursday, before the end of the Mass, the chairperson of the Liturgy Committee addresses the congregation. "Today," she says, "it is also the feast of our priests. Without them, we would not have the Eucharist. So, we, from the various parish committees, decided to give our priests a gift to wish them a happy feast day." Then another member of the committee comes up and hands us a beautiful stole. Immediately afterwards, Joe, who is very often drunk, but never in church, walks up the central aisle with a bottle of wine. He hands it to me, saying, "Man lives not on bread only, but also on wine!"

The Good Samaritan

One day, that same Joe gives us a good lesson. One Sunday evening, after the 5:00 p.m. mass, I go to greet people on the church balcony and find a group of parishioners surrounding a poor man sitting on the floor and leaning on the wall of the church. He looks exhausted, skinny and his face is emaciated. He is a Rwandan who escaped from his war-torn country (the 1994 genocide). He walked for more than two weeks to get here.

Here comes Joe, (preceding story) who asks us what is going on. We explain to him and he says, "Don't worry. I'll take care of him." So, helping the poor man to stand up and walk, he gets him into his old dented car, and goes with him. The next morning, he comes to inform me that he took him to a small local inn and asked the innkeeper to take good care of him. This morning, he paid the bill, and took the man to the *Jesuit Refugee Service*.

Other Good Samaritans

Speaking of Good Samaritans, I would like to tell another fact related to this kind of service, and which happens several years later in South Africa.

In our parish of Henley, after working hard to help prepare the place for the ordination of deacons the next day, I take three youths to their homes. Their village is about ten kilometers away in the mountains. It is already night, and the winding road is pitch dark. Suddenly, in a curve, we see a man lying on the median line! It is always risky and dangerous to stop in the middle of the night, as it could be a trap. But we cannot leave this guy like that; he is at great risks of being hit by the many cars passing at high speed. We stop, and with a flashlight, we light up the road and quickly transport the fellow to safety on the roadside. Several cars pass by; some narrowly miss him. The poor man is alive, but his head is bleeding a lot. We apply a handkerchief to reduce the blood leak. We take him to the nearest police station. The police thank us and take him to the nearest clinic.

These young people will always remember the story of the Good Samaritan they have just lived in practice. A song by

Robert Lebel (a Canadian priest musician and composer) tells us (loosely translated):

"Are there still on our roads,
People who wear their hearts on their sleeves,
Are there still Good Samaritans
Who take care of their neighbors?"

SOME BISHOPS I HAVE KNOWN

In general, my relations with bishops have been good. Overall, as you will see in the following stories, these Church leaders have shown themselves to be human, understanding and affable. I keep fond memories of them.

Bishop Cornelius Chitsulo

In Dedza, Malawi, at the very beginning of my ministry, my bishop is the first African in the southern Africa region to hold this position. He was the first Malawian priest. A humble and discreet man, he has a good heart. It is said that he initially refused to become a bishop, and the Pope had to insist on convincing him to accept.

One Monday morning, he calls me to his office; I live then in the parish of the cathedral, so he is our neighbor. He greets me kindly and says, "It seems that your choirs played drums on Saturday at Mass for your *confrère* who was taking his Missionary Oath. You understand this is not allowed in our diocese." I answer: "No, they did not play drums. But to tell you the truth, they used maracas made of large dried beans from flamboyant trees. It was great! It helps keep the rhythm." He tells me categorically that this is not allowed. These are pagan customs! I try to discuss with him, but to no avail. I assure him that it will not happen again. The choristers are disappointed, but they obey.

After a few years, attitudes begin to change; following a good education on the value of music in the liturgy, drums and other rhythmic instruments are beginning to be introduced everywhere. Indeed, it is necessary to distinguish the kinds of drums and the different rhythms: some are used in weddings, others for funerals, some for ancestral dances and finally others to praise God in the liturgy. Our bishop also is beginning to appreciate this new musical expression.

Bishop Francisco Silota, Mr. Afr.

Francisco Silota is a Mozambican M.Afr. whom I meet briefly in 1974 in Malawi. He has just been ordained a priest. I have the joy of taking him from Dedza to his home village in Mozambique. Dedza is located next to the Mozambique border; it is easy to cross between the two countries. I meet his parents and some family members.

In 1988, after 14 years of missionary work in other African countries, Francisco is appointed bishop in his native country. A few years later, I have the pleasure of seeing him again in his diocese of Chimoio. After lunch, he takes me to visit the street boys' shelter that he founded. Jokingly, he introduces me to them as his "*bandidos*" (bandits in Portuguese). Under the guidance of a few adult educators, they are about twenty boys, orphaned or rejected by their families; they go to school instead of hanging around and committing petty larceny! They are happy to take part in the smooth running of the Centre, carrying out all kinds of small chores, and tending a nice vegetable garden. They love their 'papa-bishop' and give him great respect, in a simple relationship evoking the family atmosphere they have never known.

Bishop Medard Mazombwe

One Saturday afternoon in Dedza, Malawi, while I am giving a weekend retreat to a group of 25 high school students, there is a knock at the door where I am with these young people and a Sister. One of them goes to open the door. Surprise! It is Bishop Mazombwe, of the Diocese of Chipata in Zambia! I welcome him and introduce him to the group. I

invite him to say a few words, and then I take him to the rectory for a cup of tea.

Bishop Mazombwe is travelling from Zomba on his way back to Chipata. We are located about halfway between those two points. During our conversation, I tell him that I would like to have, as usual, about 40 young people for this retreat, but they are only twenty-five. He tells me that it is a good number; we should not aim at quantity. He then relates his personal story. When he was in high school, their chaplain organized a similar retreat. When the day came, there were only two of them! A girl and himself ! The chaplain decided to give the retreat anyway. "Now," the Bishop adds, "the girl has become a Sister and is currently the Provincial Superior of her congregation, and I became a priest! We must never underestimate God's ways!" Thank you for the beautiful lesson. I hasten to pass it on to the students.

Bishop James Holmes-Siedle, M.Afr.

In 1988, during my Swahili course at the Kipalapala Language Centre in Tanzania, we get the visit of Bishop Emeritus James Holmes-Siedle, M.Afr. He is English, but after several years in Tanzania and Kenya, he fluently speaks Swahili. He is accompanied by Father Louis, a Dutchman. Both have just toured several dioceses in Tanzania to promote the setting up of Small Christian Communities in parishes. This is the priority of the bishops of East and Central Africa.

In the evening, we talk together, and he convinces me to start these small communities in Nairobi South B Parish, where I will go to work after the language course. Sometime after my arrival in this new parish and having explored the

possibilities, I suggest to my *confrères* to start Small Christian Communities in the different neighbourhoods. South B is a big city parish, which also includes a large slum and a smaller one. My fellow-missionaries are not very enthusiastic with the idea of starting small basic communities, "because", they say, "here we are in town, and people are more sophisticated; besides, they already have three prayer groups that work well."

Later, I tell them that if our people are sophisticated, this subject should be presented to them by an important person. I therefore propose to bring in Bishop Holmes-Siedle and his colleague, Father Louis. "If the parish council approves," they tell me. Two weeks later, the proposal is accepted by the Parish Council. We invite our two experts for the following month.

They give their session twice: on a Saturday afternoon in English at the parish, and on the following day, after the Sunday Mass, in Swahili in the chapel of the large Mukuru slum. Attendance at both sessions is at its peak (probably because there is a bishop!), and people participate very well, especially in the discussion inspired by the skit played by the Bishop dressed as a housewife and Father Louis in the role of the husband! There are some really comic aspects, but also some relevant teaching.

Over the following months, enriched by these two sessions, our parishioners start twenty-four Small Christian Communities in the various wards of the parish. Each community meets regularly in turns in the family homes, where they pray together and share the gospel. They learn how to put the teachings of Jesus into practice in their families and

in their neighbourhoods. They take initiatives to improve the lot of the poorest in their area and take other social actions such as petitioning the City Council for more regular garbage collection and other similar necessities for a better-living. Some richer communities start sponsoring some school children from poor families.

Cardinal Maurice Otunga

Cardinal Maurice Michael Otunga was born into a family of traditional African religion and became a Christian in his teens. He refused to succeed his polygamous father as chief of the tribe in order to pursue studies for the priesthood. He later became archbishop of the Archdiocese of Nairobi. Later, he was made a Cardinal.

One Monday morning, he calls me and asks if I will be at the rectory this morning. I say yes. He wants to see me. He comes driving his little car. I receive him with a cup of tea, a very Kenyan custom. Immediately after his first sip, he tells me, "Father Michael, I hear that girls are serving Mass here in the church!" To which I reply: "No, there are no girls serving Mass in the church." "Oh!" he said, "I must have been misinformed." I tell him, "In all truth, I must tell you that girls serve at the youth Mass in the parish hall, but not in the church." "No matter where," he says, "it's not allowed." Why?' I say. "Because they will think they can become priests!" (I feel like laughing!) So, I ask him, "I don't understand. Why do you allow their mothers to distribute communion and you refuse their daughters to serve Mass?" "Because," he says, "in our African tradition, women **feed** their families; so they can help **feed** the parish family with the Eucharist." We still talk a

little, in a very relaxed and polite atmosphere, and I see there is no point insisting. I tell him that from next Sunday we will ask the girls to stop serving Mass. He is happy and takes his leave. The following Sunday, the youth leaders are furious, but I ask them to forget this and concentrate on the great mystery we celebrate at Mass. But after Mass, they are determined to react. Among the leaders, the young men take the initiative. Together with their adult advisor Sylvia, a mother of three and financial controller for a large multinational, they decide to write to the Cardinal. A few days later, the letter is ready. Among other things, they have written: "You told Father Michael that in our African society, women feed their families; we would respectfully like to remind you that in our African culture, women also **serve** their families. So, the girls should be allowed to **serve** Mass." I approve their letter, and the next day one of the youths delivers it to the Cardinal's office. We shall never get an answer! But now, almost everywhere, girls serve Mass.

Cardinal Otunga is a practical man. One day, as we are in a meeting with all the priests of the archdiocese, he tells us about liturgical dances during festive Masses: "I have nothing against liturgical dances; on the contrary, they add life and joy to our celebrations; it's a beautiful way of praising God. But please, tell your dancers to be more expeditious: they do not have to take two steps forward, then three steps backward!" Slight exaggeration! Yet, it is true: sometimes these dances have no end!

I really appreciated this cardinal. People loved him so much they asked for and got the introduction of his cause of beatification in Rome.

The "Three Musketeers"

In the early 1990s, three Canadian bishops visit Kenya. **Bishop Bernard Hubert** of Saint-Jean-Longueuil, my home diocese, **Bishop Robert Lebel** of Valleyfield and **Bishop Charles Valois** of Saint-Jérôme, are used to travelling together every four or five years. They like to visit their missionaries in Latin America, Asia and Africa. They are nicknamed the "Three Musketeers"! This time, Kenya is the last leg of their journey. I am happy to welcome them and introduce them to the reality of the mission here.

One day, I take them to visit street children who live in cardboard shacks in the downtown underworld. We bring them some food so they may have a good meal. The three bishops are very moved to see them come out of their little cardboard huts, especially a 14-year-old pregnant girl. A few weeks later, she will give birth in a shelter run by Religious Sisters.

On Saturday evening, we plan the next day's Masses. I suggest they each participate in a different one, but they prefer to stay together in order to better share their experience in the evening. They decide to go with me for the two Masses I am scheduled to celebrate. The first one takes place in a huge slum where, once again, they can touch the dire poverty of so many corners of Africa. They are very impressed by the participation of the people during the celebration. Everything is in Swahili, but they are happy to be there. We return to the parish for the youth Mass in the parish hall. This time, it is in English, except for a few songs in Swahili and other African languages. Between 600 and 700 youths gather every Sunday

to celebrate in their own style: music with drums and electronic piano, lively dances and songs, dialogued homily. After the Mass, the Youth Chairperson welcomes and thanks the bishops. Then he presents each one with a beautiful cloth printed in bright colors and illustrated with an African proverb whose meaning he explains. Finally, Bishop Hubert gives them a word of thanks. The youths are happy and proud to have hosted three bishops from very far away!

Bishop Jan de Groef, M.Afr.

In March 2009, a Belgian *confrère* becomes Bishop of the Diocese of Bethlehem in South Africa. He is a man of God, humble and simple. Shortly before his episcopal ordination, we contribute to buy him a suit; we are used to see him wearing jeans and T-shirt! Every time he has to attend a meeting in Johannesburg, he comes to stay with us. Occasionally we also receive *confrères* from neighbouring countries who have come for medical care. Indeed, South Africa's hospitals are renowned for their high medical quality. At one point, a *confrère* stays with us for a long period of recovery from a back surgery. He is not able to bend, therefore every morning, we help him to put on his socks and slippers. One day, none of us is present, except Bishop Jan who cheerfully offers to help him. He kneels in front of him and simply helps him put on his socks and slippers. A fine example of service put into practice. Even bishops must do it with joy.

Cardinal Aloysius Ambrozic

An archbishop whom I greatly appreciated, late Cardinal Ambrozic of Toronto, calls me to his office just two weeks after my arrival: "Father Michael, you came to Toronto to work with Africans. Make them pray in any way: with dancing, drumming, singing, anything they like to use to praise God, as long as they pray." Very encouraging!

A few years later, on a Saturday morning, the African choir is invited by another parish to celebrate a special event, with a specific request to perform some typical African liturgical dances. A few minutes before Mass, the deacon in charge of protocol tells me that the Cardinal does not want any dance during the Mass. What a disappointment for our choir which has prepared so well! As there are two other choirs present, I ask them if they can take care of all the parts of the Mass, and they assure me that they can. Then we leave. I must confess that, in the following hours, I regret this decision. I am worried about my overly abrupt reaction. But it is too late.

On Monday morning, the Cardinal's secretary calls me: he wants to see me on Thursday morning. Leaders of the African community learn this and are worried. "The Cardinal will drive you out of the diocese!" they say: "We pray for you!" On Thursday morning, I arrive at the diocesan office, and, to my astonishment, the Cardinal greets me with open arms and invites me to sit down. "I hope I didn't offend the Africans," he starts. This was far from my intention! It's only that I cannot endure long ceremonies anymore; my age and my health no longer allow me to do so! Father Michael, please convey my apologies to those good people who devote

themselves so much to embellish the liturgy." I did not expect such a reaction at all! I see in this Church leader a wise and humble man, which I could not imagine before. The Africans are also impressed by his benevolent reaction.

Sometime later, his secretary calls me. The Cardinal is asking me for a service: to translate his Advent pastoral letter from English to French. His former translator cannot go on. I accept and ask her, "When does he need it?" "Tomorrow morning!" she replies. Indeed, Advent will begin in a few days! She sends me the original English text by email, and I work part of the night to get the text ready in time!

This will be repeated twice a year, for Advent and Lent, for the next three years. Then, the Pope finally accepts the Cardinal's resignation; he has already passed the retirement age. A few weeks before leaving his office, he calls me in and thanks me for all the translations; he gives me a \$500 cheque for our missions in Africa!

Archbishop Thomas Collins (now Cardinal)

Archbishop Thomas Collins succeeds Cardinal Ambrozic. One day, I ask him to come administer the sacrament of confirmation to 80 young people from the parishes of Sacré Coeur and St. Louis-de-France, the African Catholic Community and the Monseigneur de Charbonnel Secondary School. I have sometimes spoken French with Bishop Collins, and I think that he speaks well. I therefore express to him the desire of the people to have the celebration in French. Hesitating, he tells me he speaks with an accent. To which I reply that here in Toronto, everyone has an accent! Then he agrees.

On Confirmation day, he presides over Mass and confers the sacrament in a good, clear and understandable French. On leaving the church, many parents and their children come to be photographed with him; at the same time, they thank him and congratulate him for expressing himself so well in the language of Molière. Unexpectedly, a young woman approaches with a big German Shepherd dog who has Crohn's disease and asks the Bishop for a blessing. He then blesses the dog. What simplicity! Saint Francis of Assisi is no doubt delighted by this gracious gesture.

Bishop Makram Gassis

"Mgr. Makram Gassis, the famous bishop of El Obeid, in Sudan, denounces a risk of genocide of these populations that the Khartoum government wants to Arabize and Islamize by all means. He is based in Kenya, and has not been able to go to Khartoum for a few months, because he testified in Washington about what is happening in his diocese." This news bulletin dates from the late '90s. Yes, Bishop Gassis has become *persona non grata* in his home country because of his courage in denouncing the massacres against Christians in Sudan.

On November 1, 2000, Bishop Gassis attends the canonization in Rome of Saint Josephine Bakhita¹³, born in his diocese of El Obeid in 1869, she died in Italy in 1947. After his stay in Rome, Bishop Gassis passes through Toronto to give a series of conferences and interviews. He visits then the African Catholic Community where he is happy to meet

¹³ see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josephine_Bakhita

members of the Sudanese diaspora. A few years later, he returns to give new interviews. With the permission of the Archbishop of Toronto, we invite him to celebrate the Sacrament of Confirmation for some 40 young people of our parish and the African community. He adds a special gesture during this celebration: instead of giving the traditional little slap on a cheek of each confirmed (gesture fallen into disuse), he tells them that in life they will receive enough blows; now, they do not need one. Instead of this light slap, he gives each one a hug! Then he tells the newly confirmed and their parents, that in life when they receive hard blows, they should come to church to receive a hug from God!

There comes another opportunity for him to be with us. We invite him as the keynote speaker and guest of honour at the Archdiocese of Toronto's annual youth banquet. This year, the African youths are in charge of the event. They prepare it very well with various African decorations, songs, dances and dishes. Bishop Gassis does not disappoint them. During his conference, you could have heard a pin drop! He is truly a remarkable man who has lived painful experiences with his people, who is unfortunately still suffering.



Saint Josephine Bakhita
Patron Saint
of victims and survivors of slavery

THE MUSLIM WORLD

Our Society of the Missionaries of Africa was founded in Algeria with a special orientation towards the Muslim world. Some of our members are specialists in Islam and speak Arabic fluently. In Rome, we are in charge of the Pontifical Institute of Studies in Arabic and Islamology (PISAI). I am far from being a specialist, but I have had interesting encounters with some followers of Muhammad. Here are a few of them.

My Friend Karim

In Dedza, Malawi, I have a Muslim friend named Karim. He owns a small restaurant and whenever I pay him a visit, he tells his employees to treat me well and serve me a good meal for free! One day he tells me, "You know, I've been married for four years and I don't have any child yet. My friends tell me to take another wife. As a Muslim, I have the right to take up to four wives. But this precept was given to us by Muhammad in the time of the wars of religion in order to help the widows of the men killed at the front. Today, here in Malawi, there is no war. So why would I take another woman? We men have kept this instruction because of our male selfishness. If Allah wants me to have children, it will be with the wife he gave me!" I encourage him, telling him he is a man of great faith. Some years later, when I leave Malawi, Karim has become the proud father of two beautiful children. God is great!

Our Cook

For a few years, in Dedza, we have a Muslim cook for our M.Afr. community. A dedicated, respectful and competent man, Mbewe is always ready to serve. He takes a day off on Fridays because he does not want to miss his weekly prayer at the mosque. On Sundays, he works a normal day.

One Sunday, after celebrating the first Mass in the parish church, I have a cup of coffee in the rectory before going for the second mass. I then hear a conversation coming from the kitchen: "Mama"¹⁴, says our cook, "you came on foot from

¹⁴ In Africa, a mature woman is often called 'mama'

Kapesi (25 km away) with this heavy basket of potatoes on your head; You must be tired. Take a glass of water and a piece of corn, and rest a bit... As for your potatoes..., say, are you a Catholic?" "Yes," she replies. "Then," he says, "you should have come another day. On Sundays, you Christians are not supposed to work. But, since you've come from afar, I'll buy your potatoes, but only after you've gone to Mass that's about to start in a few minutes. I am a Muslim, and I go to the mosque every Friday; you're a Catholic, so you have to go to church every Sunday!"

Mbewe is married with a catholic lady who is the president of the Legion of Mary and all their children are baptized and attend the catholic school!

Two fanatic women

One day, late afternoon, in Nairobi, I am alone in my office and the door is open. Suddenly I hear some women's voices shouting in an angry tone. I listen carefully: it is not English, nor Swahili, and it does not sound like a Bantu African language. So I walk in the direction of these voices and I see two women shouting incomprehensible words while raising their fists in the direction of the church. They stand on the sidewalk outside the main entrance that leads into the church parking lot. I approach them and reach out to them with a smile. Of course, they refuse to shake my hand. One of them tells me in laborious English that we Christians are all infidels, damned, and we will all perish in hell! I ask her, "When did you arrive in Nairobi?" "A week ago," she tells me. Slowly, I suggest that they should take time to observe around and see the behaviour of the people in their new surroundings. In the meantime, some of our parishioners start arriving for the

evening Mass, which is to soon begin. With beautiful smiles, they greet me and say hello to the two veiled women.

It is sad what fanaticism and misinterpretation of Muhammad's writings can do. In fact, from the beginning of Islam, he encouraged his followers to respect Christians, and he himself was sheltered in a Christian monastery during the persecutions against his new religion. Ignorance can lead to hatred whereas truth can engender love.

An Imam friend

One day, in Nairobi, I meet an imam, a Muslim leader who conducts prayers in a mosque; I invite him for a cup of tea. He is very open and understanding. He invites me to his house for a meal. And so a friendship is created. We occasionally meet, and he sometimes asks me for advice! One day he says, "You know, my wife is not pretty, but she is very good, she has a good heart. I love her very much, but I need a younger woman. I want to go get one in Saudi Arabia (he is originally from that country, and several members of his family are still there). What do you think?" I advise him to remain faithful to his wife, but if she agrees, he can do so, since his religion allows it. A few weeks later, he returns from Saudi Arabia... alone! The woman whom his family had promised him simply refused! Women emancipation in Muslim countries is beginning slowly! I therefore encourage him to put all his love on his long-time wife and, by doing so, he will discover in her some more important qualities than exterior look.

My Muslim dentist

The first time I must get some treatment for my teeth in Johannesburg, I have the chance to meet an excellent dentist,

a Muslim originally from India. During my first visit, he asks me who I am and what I do. After the treatment, he tells me that the payment must be made with my prayers! "You are a man of God," he says, "and you simply have to pray for my family." He then shows me pictures of his wife and two young daughters. During all my years in South Africa, he never asks me for a penny, and he provides me with some treatments that would be very costly. Jokingly, he tells me that my money is worthless in his clinic!

A few days after the terrorist attack of 'Charlie Hebdo' in Paris in January 2015, I have a dental appointment with him. In mentioning this terrible incident, he tells me how sad he is and reassures me that this is not true Islam. There are good people everywhere! He is certainly blessed by God.

"Allah doesn't want me to starve!"

On transit at the Abidjan airport, in Ivory Coast, my flight is delayed by several hours due to a technical problem. Feeling hungry, I go to a small canteen and buy a sandwich. Then comes a Muslim dressed in his boubou¹⁵. He asks for a sandwich. The seller tells him he has only ham sandwiches (we know that pork is taboo for Muslims). He simply replies, "Allah doesn't want me to starve. Give me that sandwich!" This Muslim man has an open mind, close to the gospel. "The letter kills, but the spirit gives life" (St. Paul in 2 Cor. 3 :6)

¹⁵ Long white garment traditionally worn by Muslim men.

HEALINGS

In the Catholic Church, there are many cases of healing, not only in places of pilgrimage, but in several prayer groups and elsewhere. We do not shout them from rooftops, but these healings take place, sometimes very discreetly. Yet we do not always dare to call them miracles, being very cautious to make sure they are genuine. The word miracle comes from the Greek and simply means 'sign'. Thus, God often sends us discreet, and sometimes more obvious, signs of his presence in our lives. It is up to us to recognize them and read them well!

Here are some illustrations of these signs that I have been able to recognize in my fifty years of missionary and priestly ministry. These events may be a little more striking, but in our lives there are many other signs that we simply call random. I have always been touched by the words of the greatest genius of the 20th century, Albert Einstein, who said: "Haphazard is God walking incognito."

Makil and his brain tumor

A mother from the African Catholic Community in Toronto asks me to go pray for her three-year-old son, very ill in the children's hospital. He has a brain tumour, and doctors will operate on him tomorrow. After praying, I see the surgeon who shows me in a medical book how serious this tumour is, deeply rooted in the brain. He will not be able to remove it completely; the child would become like a vegetable. "We will remove everything we can with a laser, but the roots will stay there. After a few years, the tumour will swell again and cause terrible headaches. Then we will have to operate again; this will have to be repeated every four or five years for the rest of his life!"

The surgery goes well, and after a few weeks of recovery, we baptize Makil during the African Mass. I explain to our faithful the child's medical problem, and I invite them all to pray together for his full healing. Baptism is a powerful sacrament, and the prayer of the community goes to God. It is up to Him now!

In the following months, the parents regularly take their son to the hospital for routine check-ups. Doctors are surprised: the roots have dried up despite the nutrients they receive from the brain. The tumour does not start forming anymore!

Today, Makil is a healthy young man who has lived through his childhood and adolescence in a completely normal way, both in his studies and in sports. We praise the Lord!

A hole in his heart

A little baby has just been born. The parents, whose wedding I blessed a few years ago, call me from the hospital. The doctor says their little one has a hole in the heart and his chances to survive are slim. In the hospital, I find myself in front of distraught but faith-filled parents. A few other family members are present. We pray and baptize the little boy. Today, he is a healthy boy, growing up normally. Thank you, God, doctor of souls and bodies!

My voice

In 2002 and 2012, I had to have surgery for polyps on the vocal cords. Each time, I must remain completely silent for a week in order to allow the wounds caused by the surgery to heal. My *confrères* tease me saying that they have peace when I am silent!

After my second operation, during my recovery, the parish priest of Johannesburg Cathedral sends me a text message, asking if I could go celebrate Mass the next day. I text him back that I cannot because I have to keep silent for a whole week by doctor's order. He replies: "I hope it's not like Zacharia who had to wait for nine months for the birth of John the Baptist before recovering his voice!" (Luke 1, 20).

During these two periods of silence, I keep in my pocket a small piece of paper on which is written: "Excuse me: I cannot speak until...". People respond to me with signs, as if I were deaf! So, after a few such occurrences, I add on the small paper: ... "but I hear very well! You can talk to me!"

After the second surgery, the doctor tells me that I suffer from gastric intestinal reflux and this problem can come back if I do not pay attention to what I eat (avoid alcohol, fuzzy drinks and acidic or spicy foods, etc...). In addition, he tells me that I must celebrate only one Mass a day and rest my voice for the rest of the day... "don't talk to people after Mass and withdraw to your room! Don't sing anymore!... Don't force your voice... Don't scream, always speak softly... " I try it for a few months, but it is very difficult. I do not celebrate Mass in large churches, but mostly in small chapels or in Sisters' convents.

In September 2012, after my leave in Canada and a three-week session in Rome, I go to Medjugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where the Virgin Mary has been appearing to some young people for several years. There are always thousands of pilgrims who go to pray there. These are very sincere expressions of faith. So, for three days, I join a group of Canadian pilgrims with their chaplain, a M.Afr, and they pray for me. In my own prayer, I say to Mary, "If you want me to go on preaching for your Son, I need a voice."

After returning to South Africa, I often celebrate two Masses on Sundays, and at times even three! Not to mention conducting full day recollections and some 7 or 8 day retreats! I start singing again, while warning people that I might make some discordant sounds. Jokingly, I tell them: "When I was young, I was called the singing priest; now they call me the croaking priest!" But usually, I go through to the end of the song without a problem! Thank you, Lord!

Diamante and her mother's faith

Diamante was born healthy, but at three years old, she does not speak normally according to her age. At five, specialists diagnose her with a developmental language disorder (DLD) which, they say, shall persist throughout her lifetime. Her parents try all kinds of language therapies, in vain. The mother is in disarray, but she has an unwavering faith; we pray together; I bless her afterwards. "God is planning his miracle," the mother writes. Now she adds: "Teachers said Diamante would hardly go through high school. God always having the last word, now she has not only completed high school, but she is in her second session of College, in Nature Sciences, Health Option! Doesn't get in whoever wants to! Glory to God!"

Now, Diamante has become a beautiful young lady and a real 'speech machine', with superior intelligence!

VISITORS

Africa is a long way from Canada. Despite the distance, I had the joy of welcoming a few visitors during my years in the missions.

My Mother

In 1978, in Malawi, I have the pleasure of having my mother visiting with one of her friends. This friend stays only a few days, then travels to Zambia to see her cousin, also a M.Afr. The youths are well prepared to receive her with songs, dances and even a short welcome speech read by a young girl in phonetic French! The adults treat her like a queen in all the churches where we go to celebrate Mass. Everywhere, songs and dances accompany the gifts they bring her. She is overwhelmed by their generosity: each time, we return to the rectory with chickens, eggs, potatoes, carrots, onions, and even a few goats! So much so that when she arrives at the Montreal airport, she answers the customs officer asking if she has any gifts to declare: "If I had carried everything I was given, I could start a farm!" Then the customs officer lets her go with a smile.

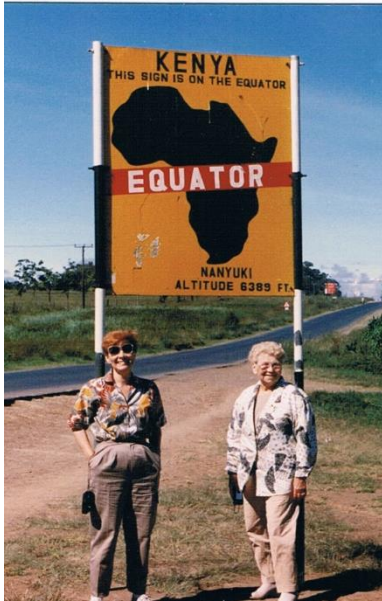
My Mother and my sister Francine

In 1989, barely a year after arriving in Nairobi, my mother and younger sister Francine come to spend three beautiful weeks with me. They are really delighted to see the vitality of the parish: the church filled at each of the seven Sunday Masses, two Masses every weekday, many people



**My mother and my sister
Francine with some Maasaï**

coming to the office, and especially all those who come to greet them cordially and bring them small gifts.



**Francine and mother
crossing the equator**

Of course, we have the chance to visit interesting resorts. In Nyeri, we sleep in the Treetop Hotel. We also visit the tomb of Baden Powell, founder of the Boy Scouts, who stayed for the last years of his life at the foot of Mount Kenya, a majestic snow-capped mountain. Finally, we spend a few days at the Indian Ocean awash with so many tourist attractions. We are even able to engage in a race on the back of giant turtles!

We also visit a large wildlife park and the Giraffe Centre near Nairobi. These tall beasts walk majestically in nature around a house for tourists. The ground floor has an office and a Gift shop. The first floor is surrounded by a balcony at the level of the giraffes' head. The attendant calls them by hitting on a tin bowl filled with their favourite food. When they come close by, everyone can feed them from their hands; the giraffes lick up the seeds with their long coarse tongue. Comes one of them, possibly hungrier than the others: she sneaks her long neck and accidentally hits my sister Francine who falls on me! Fortunately, she is not injured.

Mom and Francine return home, happy with all these discoveries of a world so different from our country of origin. At



At the Giraffe Centre

that time, in Canada, not much is known about Africa and Africans; the great wave of immigration has only just begun, and only in major cities, such as Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal. Before leaving for each of her trips, Mom's friends ask her, "Are you not afraid of those people?" And each time, after returning, she shows them pictures taken with my African friends and she explains how well received she has been, with great respect and dignity; and lavished with gifts!

A couple, friends of mine

In 1990, a couple, friends of mine, come to visit me in Kenya. The day of their arrival, Paul and Elaine have the joy of attending the premiere of "African Jigsaw" (see Musical Shows). This musical highlights the great African continent. These two friends have long dreamed of coming to Africa and now, sitting in the front row of our parish hall, they discover all the charm of our young artists' talents proudly presenting their home continent. From the first song, they are immersed in the atmosphere of what they have long desired: to discover

Africa! A young soloist dressed in her finest attire is brightened up by a strong follow-spotlight chasing away the penumbra. To the sound of gently rolling African drums and xylophones, looking at my friends, she starts singing with her beautiful voice: *"Africa! so long you have dreamed of Africa, so long you have hoped to come to this land of romance and dreams... and now at last you're here and now you'll see for yourselves the dream of Africa and the truth of Africa"*. My friends wipe tears from their eyes! For two hours, they are entranced by this vision of Africa with its joys and sorrows, with its yearnings of progress and its challenges.

Since then, they often talk about the show. They also take me on a safari to visit an animal park. Then they leave for another African country where they are to visit a Missionary Sister they know. This is a journey they will never forget.

My sister Ghislaine

From January 13 to February 4, 2010, our family's first-born sister visits South Africa. We spend three wonderful weeks together, meeting *confrères* and friends, and visiting several missions and tourist attractions, including Cape Town and the surrounding area, the beautiful seaside city of Durban, the Mountain Kingdom of Lesotho and Swaziland¹⁶. This visit allows us to get to know each other better as brother and sister and gives us the opportunity to discover together new aspects of a nation still young (15 years of freedom since the advent

¹⁶ Recently the country has been renamed *eSwatini*. The letter t sounded like a z in the Colonials' ears; the z does not exist in the Swati language. The e before and the ni after a noun indicate a geographical place: *eSwatini* means *the land of the Swati*.

of Mandela) and two small isolated kingdoms in the midst of this powerful South Africa still searching for its identity. We also meet people with great human and Christian value. The Cape of Good Hope inspires us to live in Christian hope: hope for a new world for this torn Africa, which will no doubt be saved by the Africans themselves, and especially by its many women who bear witness to courage and determination to build a better future. Ghislaine is very impressed by the resilience of African women. During her stay here, one day she accompanies me to *Radio Veritas* where I celebrate Mass. I ask her to sing an *Ave Maria* as a thanksgiving hymn after communion. Usually, the sound controller plays a meditative song from a CD. But today it is performed 'live' !



Ghislaine visiting an orphanage



**Ghislaine at Mandela Square
in Johannesburg**

PEOPLE ARE GENEROUS

I strongly believe that people are fundamentally good and generous. I have met so many wonderful people in my life as a missionary. Here are a few of their stories. There could be many more, I am sure. God bless them all!

Gratitude of a poor widow

One day, I visit a village a few kilometers from my first parish in Mua, Malawi. Some villagers tell me of a poor widow who is very sick. Her husband died a few years ago, leaving her with four young children. She manages to live, thanks to her small garden and a few hens running around the house. After some prayers, seeing that she is very ill, I offer to take her to the Mission hospital with another woman who will take care of her. In hospitals and clinics in rural Africa, someone has to accompany the sick person to cook for her. She is therefore hospitalized for a week; then, she returns home, but not without stopping at the parish to thank me.

A few weeks later, a woman comes to the rectory door. She has got a live hen and a dozen eggs. Thinking that she wants to sell them, I ask her the price. She says, "Father, you took me to the hospital the other day, and this is to thank you. You saved my life!" I did not recognize her; she looks so much better now! I feel uncomfortable to accept this gift from a poor widow, but she insists. In Africa, one cannot refuse a gift. This is a good lesson for me who am rich compared to her!

Another generous widow

In 1984, I am to begin a three year period of mission and vocation awareness programme in Ottawa and the area. A few weeks after my arrival, I go to Sudbury a few hundred kilometres away to preach in a parish. Before the Saturday evening Mass, a simply dressed elderly woman, comes to greet me, "Are you the missionary? Our parish priest announced you last week." Then she slips an envelope in my

hand. I thank her and put the envelope in my pocket, keeping on greeting people arriving for Mass.

In the evening, before going to bed, I remember the envelope in my pocket. I open it and find fifty \$20 notes! A thousand dollars! How generous! I do not have that generous lady's name or address. I ask the parish priest; he does not know her. I would like to thank her personally and offer to send her a receipt for tax purposes, but I cannot trace her. I just pray for her. I don't know if she is a widow, whether she is rich or poor, but she reminds me of the generosity of the widow of Malawi (previous story) and of the one in the Gospel.(Luke 21:1-4)

A gold watch

One Sunday in Toronto, after Mass, a generous lady tells me that she noticed my old watch with its cheap black bracelet, and she thinks it is not good enough for a priest! She wants to buy me a gold watch! I then tell her, as delicately as possible, that this old watch keeps the time very well and that I would not feel comfortable wearing a gold watch; as a missionary, it does not go with our lifestyle. As she insists, I tell her that, in addition to the simple life style argument, there is also the reality that our parish is located in the Toronto inner city, in the red light district; I would not like to get my arm cut off by a criminal determined to steal a valuable watch! She is a little disappointed, but seems to understand. The following Sunday, she brings a \$500 cheque for our missions! So I tell her this is a really useful gift that will go a long way in helping our work in Africa!

The poor also are generous

I have lived near the slums and often visited the poor and destitute, especially in Nairobi (Kenya) and Luanda (Angola); I admired their simplicity and joy. One day as I visit a large family led by a single mother, I notice a young teenage girl I have never seen before, coming out of the family cardboard hut. I ask the mother if she is a visiting niece or a friend. She tells me, "No; this girl was all alone, and was found by my children while playing in the neighborhood. She was wandering and had nowhere to go. Then, we just welcomed her into our family." For a family of eight children, without a father, this is quite a challenge! With the help of our social worker we continue to assist this generous mother. She shows her gratitude by regularly sending the bigger children to sweep the church and the parish hall.

At the farewell party of Father Ben, who has been the parish priest for several years, that good mother is present. At the end of the party, she gives him a big hug, shedding tears. Everyone is moved.

Little Eden

A five-minute walk from our home in Edenglen (in the suburbs of Johannesburg), takes us to a large Centre for physically and mentally challenged children. There are 180 of them. Forty kilometres away, in the countryside, there is also a farm for those least affected who can do some light work; there, they are 120. *Little Eden*, the name of the Centre, was founded several years ago by a couple whose history is very interesting.

Danny Hyams, a South African, meets Domitilla in northern Italy while he is serving in the army during World War II. They fall in love, get married and settle in South Africa. Domitilla has always dreamed of becoming a missionary. Both begin to care for physically and mentally challenged children whose parents cannot take care of. Deeply Christian, the couple entrusts their dream to Providence. Little by little, their work grows to become a huge charity. Both are now deceased, but their family members continue this beautiful work rooted in their faith and belief that God loves these children. Inheriting the terminology used by their mother, the founder, they call these children "God's angels"! They now have a team of nearly 275 health specialists, attendants and volunteers who look after the 300 residents in the two homes together, a rare ratio of almost one to one! Sometimes I celebrate Mass for the more lucid ones, and they become overjoyed when I invite them to sing accompanied with my guitar. Many of the volunteers come from Europe, especially young people who decide to give a few years of their lives for a service that changes them forever.

The government subsidizes this work, but not enough. When we get donations, we share with them. Many thanks to all the benefactors!

Betty and abandoned children

This is Betty's story. In South Africa, still a teenager, she wants to become a religious Sister, but her father objects. She studies administration and becomes a chartered accountant. She gets a good job with a large company. Despite her good salary, she is not happy and she often talks about it with her

spiritual advisor who simply tells her to pray and follow her heart.

One day, she picks up, from a garbage bin, an abandoned baby and takes him into her house. Then another child, then another, then another... After some time, a neighbouring couple moving out, gives her their house, seeing the beautiful work she does with these abandoned children. As her foster home grows, she finds help, and soon, faced with the growing task, she quits her job. With benefactors, she sets up a finance committee. As the number of children continues growing, she buys a third house, then a fourth. Now with a staff of eleven, they care for up to 25 children between the ages of 0 and 18 years old. A social worker comes a few days a week. When possible, and after making sure all conditions are met, a child is reunited with their biological mother. Each time a child leaves the Home, Betty is very sad. She loves them so much!

Every year, on July 18, Mandela Day, South Africans are invited to donate their time for community work. The *Look Forward Creativity Centre* (the name of this shelter) fills with volunteers who come to provide various services. I have been there a few times to help out.

Betty, the "mom" of these many children, is a very good educator. She gives them a lot of affection, as do the other 'aunties' and 'uncles', members of her staff. Children attend different daycares and schools in the neighbourhood so they can mingle with other children and thus expand their social circle.

The Archdiocese of Johannesburg, some charities and people of good will assist Betty in her efforts. We, the M.Afr.,

also contribute financially with donations from benefactors who want to help children in difficulty.

In 2016, a wealthy Family in Johannesburg offers Betty a holiday in a resort in Mauritius! Betty is stunned! "I'd be bored to death!" she says. "And I don't even have a passport!" Seeing this is not Betty's style, these benefactors still insist she should take a vacation; she never rests, except a few days to go for a spiritual retreat twice a year. Some days later, this generous family offers to send Betty to Rome for the canonization of Mother Teresa which will take place on September 4th! "You do the work of Mother Teresa. You should go and ask her for help from God!", they tell her. Wholeheartedly, Betty agrees to that! After obtaining a passport, she has the great pleasure of travelling to Rome with the mother of this generous family, and to attend the canonization ceremony at the Vatican. It is an unforgettable pilgrimage for her! I firmly believe that she deserved this time off!

An impressed youth

An 18-year-old French girl comes for two months to volunteer at the *Look Forward Creativity Centre* (previous story). One day, Betty hears her talking on the phone with her parents in France. Here's how, from a vivid memory, she tells me the conversation (at least, from the girl's side): "But mom, here these abandoned children are happy! They sing, they dance, they play and they laugh! And they pray together every day. The adults also pray with them, and I join them too. I am learning to pray. Why is it that you, Mom and Dad, have never taught me to pray? I like to pray, it calms me down, it brings

me peace and I want to know more about God." Wow! What a lesson for many parents! I have the chance to speak with her and I give her a copy of the Bible New Testament that she begins to read eagerly.

After her stay at the Centre, she is sad to go back home to resume her studies; I have lost track of her, but I am sure God is looking after her.

IT'S A SMALL WORLD!

A Malawi Proverb goes like this: "*Mapiri sakutana, koma anthu amakutana*". It could be translated as: "Mountains do not meet, but people do." Yes, the world is small; anywhere we go, we can bump into people we have known in other places and times. Pure coincidence, they say. Here are some stories to illustrate this.

A lady from Malawi in Montreal

In 1980, before leaving Malawi for my regular holiday in Canada, I pass through Lilongwe, the country's capital. The evening before my departure, I visit a family of former parishioners of Dedza, now living in Lilongwe. So here I am in Capital Hill area, where the wealthy people of various government departments reside. I am looking for the house, but I have trouble reading the badly lit door numbers because it is already night. Thinking I am at the right place, I ring the doorbell, and an unknown lady opens the door. I apologize and explain to her whom I am looking for. She tells me they live next door. I go there and find my friends. We spend a lovely evening together.

After arriving in Canada, I stay for a few days at our Provincial House in downtown Montreal. One morning, I decide to walk to the Congress Centre, where an international conference for Social Workers is being held. The newspaper reports that there are representatives from several African countries. Who knows? Maybe I will meet some people from Malawi and talk to them in Chichewa! I arrive during their coffee break. I look discreetly at each one's name tag, and greet in Chichewa the first person with the word MALAWI under her name. Surprised, she replies with a broad smile, and after some hesitation, she asks me if I could be the one who rang her doorbell in Lilongwe, about two weeks ago! Yes, I am! She's my friends' neighbour where I went that evening! She is a social worker and her husband works in one of the government ministries! It's a small world!

On Robben Island

I'm in Cape Town, South Africa, for a few days. One morning, between vocation meetings and sessions, I visit the famous Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela spent 27 years of his life in prison before the end of the apartheid regime. After the boat crossing with other tourists, the guide, who was a political prisoner with Mandela, asks us where we are from. Each one identifies their country of origin; we come from all over the world! Suddenly I hear a young man say he's from Kenya! During the visit, I approach him and greet him in Swahili; astonished, he turns around, looks at me and replies with a laugh, happy to hear his language spoken by a White man! After a moment of hesitation, he exclaims: "But it's you, Father Michael!" Imagine! He is Moffat, a former member of the parish youth club where I worked in Nairobi almost twenty years ago! He now works for a large multinational company. After the visit, he takes me out to lunch, then we have to go, he for a meeting and I for a visit to a family. It is a small world!

My "twin" *confrère* and our "twin" mothers!

Several years ago, on my birthday, I receive an email from a Swiss *confrère*. He writes something like this: "Dear twin *confrère*, let's wish each other a happy birthday! I just found out in our directory that we were born both on the same day and the same year ! Happy Birthday!" In the past, I met Claude, this fellow M.Afr. only once.

A few years later, I travel to Germany for a meeting of *confrères* working with Africans in the diaspora. After our meeting, ended a few days before May 24, I go to Switzerland, to celebrate our birthdays together. Claude resides in

Fribourg; like me, he is on home service in his country. Claude's mother joins us, as she lives nearby. The M.Afr. community has prepared an excellent meal. While chatting, imagine! we discover that she was born the same day and the same year as my mother! What a coincidence! (or is it a "God-incidence"?). And the two "twin" sons are both Missionaries of Africa! This must happen once in a million!



With Moffat at Robben Island

CRIME IN AFRICA

*"Crime is a way of life
When you're poor and have no food,
The city will not even share a crust!
Fear is a way of life
When you're poor and yet have food.
The streets are crowded with thieves,
There's no one you can trust!"*

*"Why do they leave their homes
When the city is so hard,
Exchanging self-respect for servitude ?
Why don't they go back home
If the city is so hard?
It must be better to leave
Than murder for your food! "*

This excerpt from the musical *African Jigsaw* could apply to any big city around the world. Africa is no exception. Urbanisation brings many social and moral problems which often the traditional culture could curtail to a certain extent. Almost every missionary in South Africa has had mishaps with thieves. One of us was even attacked and stabbed in the chest with a screwdriver! Fortunately, he recovered well! Unfortunately, two of our *confrères* have been killed in South Africa in the course of the years. Here are two personal anecdotes.

Seven thieves in the night...

One night in May 1994, in Nairobi, at around 2 am, I am awakened by some slight metallic noise. I listen carefully and perceive that the sound comes from the bathroom next to my room. I go and switch on the light: in the window I see a guy armed with a huge pair of metal pliers, cutting one of the burglars' bars. I ask him what he wants: "Your money!" he says. I tell him I am going to call the police. "Go ahead!" he says casually. Of course! They have cut the phone wires, and we do not have cell phones yet! I wake up my *confrères* who are in as much disarray as I am. I go back to my room, and surprise! Another fellow is doing the same thing! I take my broom, the only weapon (!) I have, and I try to push him away. He then starts swinging his machete and slightly hits my left wrist, which begins to bleed. Seeing my resistance, he walks away and calls his companions: I count seven of them!

I take advantage of this short lull to cover my wound with a clean handkerchief; it is a slight surface wound, with just a small dangling flap of skin. Together with my two *confrères*, we start shouting as loud as possible, calling for help, but to no avail. The seven thieves return with a large fence post they use as a ram trying to break down the back door. Fortunately, every night, we reinforce this door with a solid metal bar fixed across. The thugs try in vain to break down the door, and then after a few minutes, they leave. They seem to have given up. I take a big kitchen knife and go outside to make sure our night watchman is safe. I find him lying on the ground, gagged, and hands and feet bound! I cut the ropes and he frees himself from his gag. Fortunately, the thieves are gone. I drive

immediately to the mission hospital where I am given an anti-tetanus injection and get my wrist bandaged.

What do we do next? We report to the police, but nothing is done. We fire our night watchman - several times we have found him sleeping on the job! We hire a Maasai who comes to us with his bow and arrows! The Maasai are renowned to be the best and bravest watchmen. We also discuss the possibility of getting a gun, but reject the idea as not being proper for priests. Instead, we install a powerful alarm system and strong lights all around the church, the parish hall and the rectory.

... and the legend that follows!

The next few days, seeing my bandage, people ask me what happened. I explain the incident as it happened. After a few days, the story is amplified and I become a hero! "Father Michael," they say, "fought alone against fourteen thieves and one of them chopped off his wrist with a machete, and his hand hung only by a piece of skin. At the hospital, they stitched his hand up in full!"

I have sometimes used this story to speak against gossip! See how we can distort and distort the facts. Today we would talk about 'fake news' or 'alternative truth'!

Concerning the thieves, fortunately they were not armed with guns; and they certainly were not "professionals" because they came on a Friday night, while there is surely more money in the house on a Sunday night, the day of the church Mass collections!

With a young man from Zimbabwe

One day in Johannesburg, I go to meet a young Zimbabwean who wants to join our Society of Missionaries of Africa. He works on a construction site downtown and ends his day at 4:30 p.m. We meet in a small café in a shopping mall. After our conversation, I ask him to show me, close to here, the Methodist church where hundreds of refugees from Zimbabwe are sheltered. The sidewalks are teeming with people coming back from work. It is still daylight. As we are walking, I am suddenly caught from behind by a strong arm around my neck, and I lose consciousness. Lying on the pavement, I feel the young man's hands pushing me on the chest and saying, "Father, wake up!" I wake up, and he tells me that he tried to intervene, but a second thief threatened him with a gun and told him he would shoot if he tried anything! All the while, pedestrians simply pass by! The thieves stole my wallet with very little money, but containing my driver's license and credit card. Fortunately, in their haste, they didn't search my other pocket containing my cell phone and my car key. So I drive home, phone my bank in Canada and explain everything. The bank clerk tells me their computer shows that, in the last few minutes, the thieves managed to buy for \$700 of alcoholic drinks from *Liquor City* store. But he reassures me that VISA will pay for this. Within a week, I receive another card, this one with a computer chip and a mandatory password; much safer.

STREET CHILDREN

All over the world, abandoned or runaway children are attracted to big cities, and Africa is no exception. Sometimes parents cannot afford to feed and clothe their children or send them to school. Then they go aimlessly roaming the streets.

In Nairobi, the phenomenon spreads on a large scale. Some of the boys work 'honestly', guarding parked vehicles while their owners go shopping; but if you don't pay them well, next time they might damage your car. Others resort to all kinds of schemes to attract the sympathy of pedestrians, and especially to make money they will use to buy food, but too often to buy junk drugs, to get high in order to forget their misery. Sometimes their initiatives are rather aggressive. For example, some find old syringes and threaten passers-by, telling them that these syringes are infected with HIV, and that they will prick them if they do not give them a good amount of money!

One day, two young women walking on a city street have an unpleasant surprise: two street urchins approach, one jumps and gives one of the ladies a quick peck on a cheek and they both run away! The two dumbfounded ladies look at each other with astonishment and realise that their purses are gone!

KWETU Home of Peace

As a result of our theatre and music shows, young people start talking about what to do with the small income raised through ticket sales. It is not a big amount, therefore some propose we organize a picnic or a party for street children. But one of the more ambitious leaders suggests to build a shelter for these stray children.



The beginnings with parish volunteers

This would offer a more permanent solution to their homelessness. Little by little, the idea is catching on. One of the leaders talks to his father, who works at Nairobi City Hall in the Department of Urban Planning; he obtains for us a free plot of land not too far from the church.

The parishioners come to clear the ground and build a temporary shelter with basic facilities to prepare a meal for the street children every Saturday. Young people and parents volunteer. Every week the number of children increases. So I apply to *Development and Peace*, the aid body of the Canadian Bishops' Conference; they grant us \$54,000 ! We

build permanent facilities: kitchen, dormitory, class rooms, etc. Every month we have a special collection at the church, and some wealthier parishioners bring produce from their farm in the countryside. We form a board of governors to administer the project; it goes on very well to this day. Each year, this committee organizes a golf tournament and a dinner-dance to benefit *"KWETU"*. The Centre is now under the leadership of some Kenyan Religious Sisters, and they have already opened another satellite Centre in the countryside, 15 kilometres from *KWETU*. These two Centres are only for boys. There are other places for girls in the city; the girls are less likely to run the streets.

I am always happy to hear from the staff and see that many of the boys who have been there are now in high schools and colleges, and some even in University! Some already have decent jobs and take good care of their families.



Partial view of KWETU Home of Peace

Note: the name *"KWETU Home of Peace"* was chosen by the youths of the parish after a competition to find a meaningful name. The whole name means "AT HOME Home of Peace".

Charity of a little Buddhist

A mother comes to visit KWETU with her 10-year-old son. She and her family are Buddhists, but they seem to have a great respect for the Catholic Church, especially for our charities. I take them to visit the Centre, and they look very impressed. A few days later, they come back. The young boy brings a gift for the street children. He has saved around \$100 to buy a new bicycle, but he was so touched by the poverty of the KWETU boys that he decided to keep his old bicycle and donate that money to our Center. We find generous people in all religions!

Washing the feet of street children

Our Parish Liturgy Committee is preparing for Holy Week. Looking at the Holy Thursday Mass, the members ask themselves: "How can we make foot washing really meaningful? Today, here in Nairobi, whose feet would Jesus wash?" After some discussion, a member of the committee suggests: "If Jesus were here in the flesh, wouldn't he wash the feet of the poorest of the poor?" The discussion continues and everyone seems to agree. But, who are the poorest of the poor? Soon the answer arises: street children. We all agree, and we ask *KWETU Home* to send us twelve boys for Holy Thursday evening. But all the other boys also want to get their feet washed! We know that this historical gesture of Jesus is symbolically reproduced, so it is not necessary to stick to twelve. But we cannot take them all! Finally, about twenty children are chosen and show up at the Holy Thursday Mass, eager to get their feet washed! The parishioners are very moved by it. The water has never been so dirty! I truly believe

that Pope Francis came to confirm and approve this way of doing things when he did the same with young prisoners!

Salome and street children

Salome is a widow in her fifties, and her children, all adults, have left home. She feels very lonely. She comes to me often with her psycho-emotional problems; she says she has nightmares and she experiences a lot of anxiety. I suggest she go see a Jesuit psychiatrist friend of mine. After meeting him a few times, she does not feel any better. Then I suggest to her to volunteer helping street children. She agrees, and she immediately begins to collect some from the streets and take them to KWETU. She takes care of them like a mother, and in a few days she starts feeling much better! She feels useful and has found meaning in her life!



Enjoying a good meal!

REFUGEES

AND

IMMIGRANTS

More than 70 million people are forcibly displaced worldwide; we call them refugees, whereas immigrants choose to move to another country. I have met many of them in my years in Canada, and I found in them men and women full of resilience and enthusiasm to start a new life and soon contribute to their newly found society. One main characteristic I see in African refugees and immigrants is their strong faith in a God who will never abandon them.

Sponsoring an African Family

The African Catholic Community of Toronto decides to sponsor an African family. Several months before its arrival, we form a committee to receive it through the refugee Office of the Archdiocese of Toronto. That family is now in a refugee camp in a country near their country of origin. The father passed away; hence, there are the mother, two girls aged 10 and 11 and two boys, aged 4 and 6. The Canadian government pays for their traveling fees, refundable by the family within a few years after their arrival. The members of the committee, need to guide the mother and her children: find them a place to live, a family doctor, school, etc. Fortunately, in the committee, there are some people originally from the family's home country who speak the same language. We also give them some intensive English classes. After some time, and following the mother's desire, we direct her to another Christian church that includes several people from her own country. We would rather keep her and her children with us, but not being Catholic, we leave her free to choose. Nevertheless, we continue to help as long as needed.

A Welcomed Refugee Family

Another family, from a poorly administered African country, is sponsored by close relatives already living in Canada, and with the help of the Diocesan Church. Upon its arrival, a cold and frigid November, the Parents and the six children go to the nearest Catholic parish for Sunday Mass. They are not warmly dressed for this early winter climate. Upon seeing them, the parishioners get together to help them

find what they need for our Canadian winter. The two parents quickly find work while pursuing their own education, as do the three older children. After more than three years, they are well integrated and doing very well. They are so successful in repaying two-thirds of the total cost of airfares purchased by the government that the Department of Immigration waives the last installment of \$3,000! Now, they have become Canadian citizens!

Formidouble...

One day in Toronto, a mother comes from a totalitarian and dictatorial country in Africa. She is accompanied by her two young daughters, aged three and five. Her husband is in prison in their home country because of his political positions. The mother is very courageous and resourceful. The two girls fit very well into our parish school. The principal of the school says they are very intelligent. After two years, finally, the father arrives. I tell him how great his wife has been, and I would even say more, "formidouble" (play on word in French: doubly great!); Teasing the youngest, I ask her: "That's right, isn't it, your mom was 'formidouble'?" To which she replies: "No!" and she keeps silent for a moment. We wonder what she is going to say, and finally she says with a very proud look: "Mom was 'formitriple'!" (three times great!)

DOCTORS IN AFRICA

I was fortunate to know some very good medical doctors in Africa. There are now more and more highly skilled African doctors, but in my first years in the mission, there were mostly young doctors from Europe. They enjoyed working a few years in Africa, certainly to serve, but also to gain experience. As newcomers to the profession, they had to do things that would have been entrusted to their senior colleagues in their home countries. Here are some doctors I have known in Malawi.

In Mua

During my first two years in Mua, a young Dutch doctor arrives with his wife and their two-year-old daughter. They are not practicing Christians, but they are both very kind, and he is very devoted in his work. He likes his patients, but he is amazed to see that they always call the priest before him! Indeed, we are often asked to give the sacraments to the sick. In addition, this young doctor is surprised that sometimes elderly people refuse to let their hands and foreheads be washed, where the priest has traced a cross with the oil of the sacrament of the sick!

In Dedza

Another young Dutch doctor works at the government hospital in Dedza township. Sometimes, he comes to spend the evening with us. He tells us all kinds of anecdotes that have happened during his work. I remember one of them. At times, when there is an electrical power outage (which is quite common!) in the middle of a surgery, his anesthetist, a very corpulent Malawian, tells him: "Don't worry, doctor. I will give him my kiss of life!" Then he leans over the patient's face and gives him mouth-to-mouth respiration until the emergency generator is turned on!

In Ntcheu

During my stay in Ntcheu, a young Scottish couple, both doctors, works at the government hospital. John is a surgeon and Mary a pediatrician. They complement each other very well.

In this region, there are many cases of goiters, due to the lack of iodine in their diet. So John and Mary campaign by inviting people to come to the hospital with containers filled with clean water. Nurses are instructed to simply pour a few drops of iodine into the water and give each family a small bottle of iodine, showing them how to do the same at home. After a while, they come back to take other iodine. Gradually, goiter problems are decreasing considerably in the region. Not to mention that iodine purifies unsafe water.

One Sunday afternoon, John and Mary arrive together at the rectory while I am eating an apple. I tease them, saying "An apple a day keeps the doctor away! But what can be done with **two** doctors? ..."

ANIMAL STORIES

In Malawi, one of our old *confrères* translated into chichewa the fables of Lafontaine who himself had been inspired by the Greek writer Aesop. These fables were taught in schools for several years.

In Africa too, different tribes have their own animal stories (*nkhani za nyama*, in Malawi). Orally transmitted from generation to generation, they are used to teach life lessons to children and young people.

Animals can often inspire us; we can learn from the animal world because we are one with nature.

Often, in homilies and in catechism lessons, I use these stories and fables to illustrate some points. Then I notice how attentive my listeners become!

Phydeault

Instead of writing his name Fido, we like to spell it Phydeault, because he is so special! Yes, at the age of twelve, I receive this beautiful gift: a big dog of mixed breeds, German shepherd and St. Bernard. He quickly becomes the family's beloved pet. I could tell you a lot about him, but I limit myself to two anecdotes.

Phydeault was really strong. Harnessed to a sled in the winter or a small cart in the summer, he likes to pull the children, which causes the joy of the neighbors. My cobbler grandfather made him a comfortable harness, which distributes well the weight to be towed.

He also has a protective instinct. Neighbours tell us that one day they see our faithful dog on the sidewalk with our little brother Jean-Luc, who is only three or four years old at the time, and who wants to cross the street. Immediately, Phydeault, with his powerful mouth, grabs his backside and pulls him back to the safety of the sidewalk!

Phydeault was really important in my life as a teenager; he followed me everywhere, even to the Scout camp for two weeks each summer, much to the delight of the boys.

The dog and the cat

In Mua, some Sunday afternoons, upon returning to the parish from a few days in an outstation church, my *confrères* are not yet back or are already resting. Still, our dog and our cat are there to welcome me! The dog shows a great deal of affection as he runs towards me, waving his tail and licking me; he shows his joy at seeing me again. As for the cat, he is

slumped in the heat of the day and sleeps in a corner or on a bag of maize. Sometimes he opens his eyes and seems to think, "Ah! It's just him!" and he goes back to his slumber immediately!

I ask people in a homily or catechism class: "How do you welcome Jesus? With the enthusiasm of the dog, or with the indifference and passivity of the cat?"

Winston

In Dedza, I receive the gift of a big bullmastiff which a couple from England leaves behind when they are going back to England. Upon arriving home, they would not want to quarantine their dog Winston (he looks like Winston Churchill!).

Winston is hefty and muscular, and he has an impressive big mouth, but he is very gentle because he grew up with a child, his owners' daughter.

The owner tells me how one day



Winston and a brave boy

he had to discipline him: their baby daughter was crawling and went to grab a bone in the dog's dish, who began to growl angrily at her. The master then slapped the dog, scolding him loudly: "Never! Never bite a child!"

Around our rectory, Winston is free of his whereabouts. He never strays from the courtyard, which is not fenced. He is a good guard and everyone fears him upon seeing his size and hearing him barking with his deep voice. But he always respects people who come to the office or to the church. Only the school children bother him: when they pass in front of our house, they like to tease him by shouting, "Winston! Winston!" So he chases them, but one of us or our cook calls him back and he obeys immediately. One day, I am alone in the house, and suddenly I see Winston chasing a young boy. The dog and the kid are already far away. So I run outside, and a few hundred metres away, I see Winston on top of the boy lying on the ground. I shout: "Winston, come back!" He leaves the child who gets up trembling. "Did he hurt you?" I ask him. Sobbing, the boy says no, and runs away. Since then, the school children do not bother Winston anymore; the boy must have told his friends what happened! I wonder if Winston just remembered his master's lesson not to bite a child, and simply decided to give this kid a good scary lesson!

Mini

Before Winston, in Dedza, there is Mini! It's a little dachshund, short on legs, a kind of sausage dog! Malawians are not used to such small dogs, and they always ask, "But when will she grow up?"

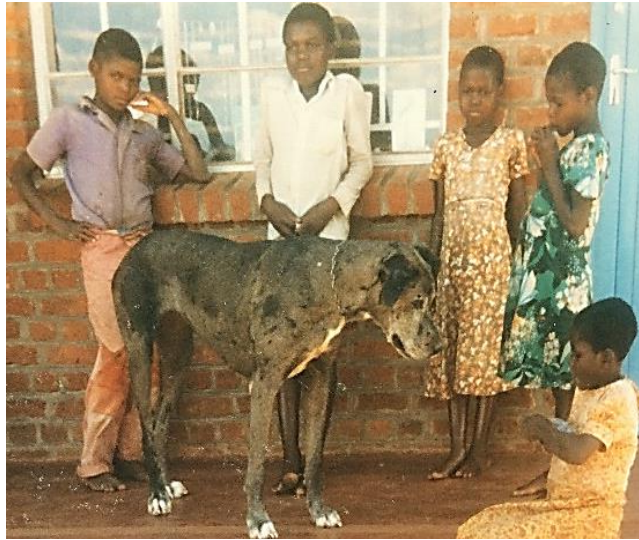
Mini has a very sensitive hearing, and when the church bell rings, she howls non-stop! So, one imagines that she prays in her own way!

Mini-skirts being banned in Malawi, we jokingly say that our **Mini** is the only one not to be banned in the country!

Annabelle

While in Ntcheu, I receive another dog, a gift from another couple; both are teachers at a large high school.

They return to England and look for 'a good home' for their



Annabelle with some children

purebred Great Dane! High as a kitchen table, slender like a Greyhound, Annabelle arouses the curiosity of people who do not know such large dogs. Indeed, most dogs in rural Africa are of medium size, and often thin. Some wonder if she is really a dog or a domesticated wild animal! Annabelle is a good guard at night, but very kind with people who come to the parish by daytime.

One way for Great Danes to show their affection is to put their front paws on our shoulders! Annabelle is tall enough to do that! But she is taught not to do so, because she has already knocked down a few people! Therefore, she uses another strategy, specific to her breed: she pushes the side of her body on the side of the person. Now, if the person is short (like this

Filipina Sister who sometimes visits us), Annabelle almost knocks her down! She must be reminded to go smoothly in showing her affection!

"Come get your turkey!"

A few months before Christmas, in Mua, my first mission in Malawi, we buy a live turkey and keep it for the Christmas party. One day, the Sisters who take care of the hospital, send a message saying: "Come get your turkey!" indeed, our turkey has flown out of the henhouse and is strolling proudly on the hospital grounds! People here are not used to seeing such a big poultry! The pregnant women in the maternity section are afraid and run away from it! The Sister in charge tells me to take it back before it scares the expecting women and causes some of them to give birth prematurely! I take it back to its pen and I raise the fence of the chicken run.

The day before Christmas, we make our turkey drink a small glass of gin to help relax its muscles, and we kill it and prepare it well for the Christmas meal! The alcohol makes the flesh more tender and the cooking easier! Try it or ask chef Ricardo¹⁷ !

Bongololo

The '*bongololo*' (in chichewa) is a millipede. I have used the following story a few times to illustrate a teaching in a homily.

One day as I am sitting outside, I see a *bongololo*. Then I say to God, "I don't quite understand. It seems to me that a

¹⁷ Ricardo is a very popular Master Chef on French television in Canada

small creature like this, with so many legs should move much faster! If I had that many legs, I would run like a champion!" Then, I give a flick to this big millipede, and it immediately curls up on itself!

So I tell the congregation that some of us are like *bongololos* in their Christian life: they have a thousand and one talents, but spend their time dragging their feet! We try to get them involved in the parish, but they curl up on themselves! They have all kinds of reasons to do nothing! And I end by asking them the question: are you a committed Christian or a *bongololo* Christian?

VARIOUS

MEMORIES

The following stories and anecdotes may seem quite disparate. Most are poles apart from one another. They are based on people and facts I have come across in the course of my life. I hope you enjoy them!

Sister Cathy and the apple

A young White Sister (SMNDA) who adapts well to the customs of local women in Malawi, learns to carry things on her head in the manner of African women.

One day, I am in an outstation and Sister Cathy, who is a nurse, arrives to visit the local dispensary near the rural church where I am teaching catechumens. After her visit to the clinic, I see her coming towards the church with a beautiful red apple balanced on her head. Giving it to me, she says, "For a Canadian, a fruit from your home!" Indeed, apples do not grow in Malawi, except in the remote region of Tsangano, in high altitudes where there is a cold season. The Mua region is definitely too hot for apple growing. From her handbag she takes out a second one for the catechist. What a nice 'coffee break' !

"Are you a real priest?"

In Nairobi, two young men come to my office. They are students in a college run by an ultra-conservative Catholic group. One of them starts, "Father Michael, we were wondering if you are a real priest!" I laugh and ask them why they are asking me this question. "It's that, says one of them, you don't act like the other priests." I tell them to give me examples of my 'non-clerical behaviour' !

The first one says, "At Mass, when you say the words of consecration, instead of leaning over the altar and looking at the bread, you show it to everyone by making a semicircle; then, you do the same with the cup of wine." I tell them, "Do you know what Pope John Paul II did during his visit to

Canada in August 1984? While celebrating Mass in a large Montreal park, with a crowd of several thousand people, at the moment of consecration, he lifted the large host of bread and showed it to everyone by slowly turning on himself, making a complete circle of 360 degrees. Then he did the same with the cup of wine." My two young visitors are stunned! After a few seconds, I ask them if there is anything else I do not do right. "No," they say, "that's it." I take this opportunity to give them a little teaching: the priority of the heart over the rites. A ritual must speak to the heart and be meaningful to people.

Nairobi and Dar es Salaam attacks

On 7 August 1998, the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, were simultaneously hit by terrorists, killing 224 people and injuring several others. At that time, I live in Toronto. We hold an ecumenical prayer service to pray for the victims and those who are mourning. A 10-year-old Kenyan girl living near Toronto, whose family I have known since my years in Nairobi, has agreed to testify on what she experienced while she was visiting there.

A little nervous in front of this large congregation, she is accompanied by her big brother who supports and comforts her. Here, in short, is what she says:

"That very day, with my big sister, we decide to go visit our aunt in downtown Nairobi; she works in an office next door to the U.S. Embassy. But while we are walking to the bus stop, my sister notices she has forgotten her ID card. We then go back to get it. Upon entering the house, our cousin, all distraught, shows us on television what has just happened! A bomb has just exploded at the U.S. Embassy, and the impact

is so powerful that the building next door is also severely damaged. We are worried and decide to wait for more news. A few minutes later, we learn that our aunt is among the 213 dead!" At the same time, in Dar es Salaam, there are eleven dead.

What a dramatic story told by this young girl! She returns to her place in tears, consoled by her big brother. She is really brave to have given such a testimony! And our prayer becomes even more fervent, as we are inspired by this live witness.

A miracle?!

I visit a sixth grade class in our parish school in Toronto. As soon as the opening prayer is over, several hands rise. I ask the most insistent pupil to explain their question. "Yesterday," he says, "we went to a basketball tournament. We were losing 4-10, and we asked the referee to give us a minute's respite. We held hands in a circle and prayed an 'Our Father'. From then on, we played much better and won 18 to 15. It's a miracle!" I take this opportunity to tell them that prayer does not change God, but it changes us, and I add: "You did not say that God blew you higher with some kind of invisible springs under your feet, or that he sent angels to redirect the ball and put it in the basket, or other similar wonders as seen in the movies. You just played better. Yes, prayer gives wings, but natural wings, that is, God helps us with his Spirit, but we must make our personal effort. Saint Ignatius of Loyola said, 'Pray, for everything depends on God, but act as if everything depended on you.' " What a good opportunity for a concrete lesson!

Chapter 13, verse 4 minus 8!

The grade two pupils are in church with their teacher to practice for their First Communion to take place next Sunday. When the time comes to rehearse her reading, a little girl begins: "A reading from the first letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians, chapter 13, verses 4 minus 8!" The teacher and I are trying to hold back our laughter! Then the teacher explains to the child that the hyphen between these two numbers is not the mathematical sign 'minus', but simply a sign that means 'up to'. Then you have to say "verses 4 to 8." In some churches, it is customary to quote the chapter and verses of the readings.

Fortunately, this is just a practice! The following Sunday, in front of the parents and the whole Sunday assembly, our young reader goes through her reading in an impeccable way! The importance of practice is clear. Never assume a child knows everything!

Does God Have a Phone Number?

During a school Mass, at the beginning of my homily, I press the ring button of my cellphone. I apologise to the teachers and the children and I answer and say: "Oh! God! It's you? ... yes, as you can see, I'm here with all the school children! " All the children become attentive and curious, except the older ones who show an air of suspicion! I tell them: "Children, it's God! He greets you all and says..." Then I just go on telling them what God wants to teach them from the readings of the Mass! They listen so carefully! Finally, I tell them it was only a game, explaining that I just wanted to

show you how we can pray. God does not have a phone number! Yet, you can talk with him at any time. Now, take a moment of silence to talk with God." And all become so quiet and prayerful, including the teachers!

Another day, a grandmother calls me. Laughing, she explains how her five year old granddaughter asked her for Jesus' phone number! When the grandmother told her she does not know, she insists: "Ask Father Michael; he must know!" She then asks her granddaughter why she wants to talk with Jesus over the phone. The little girl answers: "Because mom and dad are always quarreling and I want Jesus to stop them!" The grandmother then tells her that she has to pray to Jesus who hears everything in her heart. Then, they prayed together over the phone, and regularly continued to do so. Gradually, peace came back in the family.

African Way of the Cross

On Good Friday in Toronto, at the initiative of the leaders of the African Catholic Community, every year we hold a Way of the Cross in the streets. In the parish of Our Lady of the Assumption, the Way of the Cross stretches over a distance of about three kilometres. As our



African Way of the Cross in Toronto

neighbourhood includes several Jewish families, this expression of faith towards the Jew Jesus of Nazareth attracts many curious people. But our Jewish brothers and sisters always show us a lot of respect. Our relationships in general are cordial. (see next story)

The second parish that welcomes us, la paroisse du Sacré-Cœur, is in the inner city. Therefore, we start the Way of the Cross at the Town Hall and follow a circuit of almost four kilometres. Each time, this event brings together a crowd of 150 to 200 people, and we take turns carrying a huge four metre high cross made of rough wood. Police officers accompany us by bicycle and by car to ensure safety and control the flow of traffic. They offer us this service for free. Each time after the event, I send a thank you note to the Chief of Police who, in return sends me thank you note... for thanking him! One day I meet him and tell him that I am impressed to receive his word of thanks every year, and I add that it is not necessary to answer me. He then tells me that we are the only ones who ever thank him for this service; all the other groups simply take for granted this police service! This is his way of showing that he appreciates our gratitude.

Our Jewish neighbours

In general, our relations with our Jewish neighbours are good. On the territory of Our Lady of the Assumption parish in Toronto, there are several synagogues, and we come across some Jewish brothers and sisters almost daily. For example, one day, as I am fixing a table outside the church, a Jewish man passes by with his grandson. I greet them, and then I add for this gentleman who seems a little perplexed to see me

working manually: "My Master was the son of a Jewish carpenter." He smiles and continues on his way!

My allergies

At the age of five, one day, as I was in the woods picking berries with my father, I began to sneeze non-stop and running out of breath so much so that I could no longer walk. My dad had to carry me piggyback to the car. This was the beginning of my allergy called hay fever.

Since then, these bouts of allergy come back every spring and summer, with the first tree leaves, ragweed and dust. This condition follows me all my life, except in some corners of Africa where I hardly feel it. The funny thing is when I celebrate weekday Mass in Our Lady of the Assumption Parish in Toronto. About thirty elderly people come to our small chapel at 9:00 in the morning. Sometimes I sneeze up to ten or fifteen times during Mass, and according to English custom, each person present responds to the sneezes, almost in unison: "Bless you!" It adds to the dialogue!...

Saved by the Eucharist

One late afternoon I get a phone call from Doreen, an elderly lady I know well: "Father Michael," she says, "you probably noticed that I wasn't at Mass this morning. I'm not well. Could you bring me communion?" I tell her that I am very busy and that tonight I will be in a meeting. I promise to bring it to her in the morning; I will call her before coming.

The next day, around 10 am, I call her and her phone rings several times before finally she answers, panting and breathless. I ask her what's going on, and she says, "I'll explain when you come!"

Arriving at the large housing complex where she lives, I take the elevator to the twenty-third floor where her apartment is located. As soon as she sees me, she starts crying, she hugs me and says, "You saved my life! When the phone rang, I was on my balcony, getting ready to jump down!" After calming down, I explain to her that it was not I who saved her life, but Jesus in the Eucharist. Before I give her communion, I make her promise never to try again such an attempt to end her life. She died a few years later at the age of 92.

Many elderly people suffer a lot from loneliness and experience stressful situations that can sometimes lead them to despair.

Eduardo dos Santos

The Bishop of Bethlehem, a diocese of South Africa, asks us for a service: to welcome to our house, a young Brazilian who returns home after a few years of service in Angola with an organisation called Fazenda da Esperança (Farm of Hope). As this group also works in the Diocese of Bethlehem to help rehabilitate drug and alcohol addicts, Bishop Jan De Groef occasionally asks us for such a service. As I can cope with the Portuguese language, I am the one to pick him up at the airport. Having never seen him, I prepare a sign with his name '*Eduardo dos Santos*' clearly written in large print. This is also the name of the current president of Angola! At the airport, people are surprised to see me holding this name card! Some ask me if I am waiting for the president of Angola! Laughing, I reassure them that it is only a namesake! Finally, Eduardo arrives and comes to spend the night with us, to resume the next day his journey to Brazil. He is a good young man and of great Christian conviction.

'Less tempting for thieves'

An elderly *confrère*, with whom I live in Toronto, is always jovial, despite his aches and pains of all kinds due to old age. He often likes to whistle and hum tunes known from the good old days. He is also a good cook.

One day, I ask him why he never wants to wash his car, or have it washed. He simply replies that a dirty car, "is less tempting for thieves!"

2 kilometres of ground beef!

In the mid-1970s, the Malawi government adopts the metric system for weight and length measurement units. One day as I am waiting for my turn at the local butcher's counter, the lady in front of me asks him for two kilometres of minced meat! The butcher and I laugh heartily and we explain to her that it is kilograms and not kilometres!

It is always hard to adapt to change, especially at the beginning!

Kungoni

In 1978, a Canadian *confrère*, Claude Boucher, is appointed to Mua, which was my first parish in Malawi. He has the special mission to help deepen the culture and traditions of the *Achewas*, Malawi's main tribe. Claude, from my native diocese of Saint-Jean-Longueuil, was in his fourth year of theology while I was in my first year in Ottawa. Our parents have met there during family visits; subsequently, they continued to meet occasionally. Claude is a born artist in all fields of painting, sculpture, theatre, etc. He studied

anthropology in England. He is the right man for such a project. In Mua, he sets up the *Kungoni* Centre ("near the falls", as it is located close to a waterfall), which includes an art school (painting, sculpture, batik, etc.), and a magnificent museum. There are also small motel units in the style of African huts, with bedrooms, toilets and showers where occasional tourists, or *confrères* can spend a few days. There is even a restaurant, open on request.

Claude and his artists have decorated several churches throughout Malawi, always drawing inspiration from the culture and styles of that country. They have also decorated some hotels for tourists, and even the government's presidential palace. Claude also composed some liturgical rites highlighting the coming and presence of Jesus Christ among the indigenous peoples of Malawi. In addition, he does a lot of research on flora and fauna in order to foster respect and care for creation in line with Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si*. (visit kungoni.org)

"Fortunately, God created women!"

One day, in a Malawi village, I attend the wedding of a couple whose marriage I blessed in the morning; I am sitting with a group of men and the village chief. We are chatting happily and drinking local beer, while young girls and women dance and sing. At one point, the chief says, "It's beautiful to see our women dancing; it brings more life to our celebrations! We thank God for giving us women, otherwise our lives would be really boring!" Nice appreciation!

Harriet and Pascal's wager¹⁸

Without having known Blaise Pascal's wager, Harriet lived it and benefited from it. Here is how. Today is my first visit to a large high school in Nairobi. After class, a 16-year-old student wants to talk with me. With sharp eyes and a brilliant facial expression, she tells me that last year, a priest came to talk to the students and, after class, she told him: "All this, your business of faith and religion, is rubbish! I don't believe in God! I spend my time debating against religion and I don't care for any of it!" I ask her what the priest answered. "He simply told me that faith is a gift", she says. "You have it or you don't. But like any gift, you can ask for it." And she goes on: "Then I told myself that I have nothing to lose. In my heart, I said this: "God, if you exist, give me faith, it won't hurt me! If you don't exist, you won't be able to give it to me and I will just continue as usual! Then little by little, I started reading the Bible, going to church, chatting with Catholics and praying. I think God has given me faith, and I would like to be baptized."

Then Harriet begins the catechumenate, and after two years she receives baptism in the presence of her family and her

¹⁸ **Pascal's wager** is an argument in philosophy presented by the 17th century French philosopher, mathematician and physicist, Blaise Pascal (1623–1662). It posits that humans can bet with their lives that God either exists or does not. Pascal argues that a rational person should live as though God exists and seek to believe in God. If God does not actually exist, such a person will have only a finite loss (some pleasures, luxury, etc.), whereas he stands to receive infinite gains (as represented by eternity in Heaven) and avoid infinite losses (being enclosed on himself for eternity). (As summarized by Wikipedia)

school friends. Little by little, her family members and some of her classmates follow in her footsteps and, in the coming years, they also are baptised.

A threatened businessman

One morning in Nairobi, I am alone in the parish, working in my office. A luxury car arrives in the church parking lot, and a well-dressed man comes out and walks to my office. I welcome him, inviting him to sit down. He looks nervous as he begins to explain his situation. He is the CEO of a large multinational company. He is tense as he shows me a threatening letter he has just received. It says that he will be reported to the Secret Services of the national police with proof that he is in the process of setting in motion a plot to assassinate the president of the country! In the same envelope, there is a copy of a plan written and supposedly signed by himself (they imitated his signature) with all the details of the unfolding of the plot! The letter tells him that he must go to a certain location at 5:00 pm and deposit an envelope containing US\$50,000, otherwise he will be reported to the police Secret Service. Nervously, he tells me he is afraid for his family. He is a Catholic and trusts priests; so, he asks me what to do. I simply suggest that he go immediately to the police station and give this envelope with all its contents to the head of the Secret Service. He is anxious and hesitant to do so; often, the police are not cooperative. After praying together, he goes to the police office.

An hour later, he comes back, smiling and relaxed. He tells me that the police had already received three other businessmen with the same story! They told him not to worry

and that they had the matter in hand. I invite him into the rectory and we celebrate with a cup of tea and biscuits! This man has become a benefactor of our *KWETU* Home of Peace for Street Children, and he often lends us his company bus for our group outings.

A converted priest

I know a missionary who has lived a long life of extraordinary dedication after making a serious mistake. As a young priest in Ireland, he leaves the priesthood to join the forces of the Irish Republican Army (IRA). One day, it is his turn to plant a bomb, but he is late and one of his friends decides to take his place, but the bomb explodes in his hands and kills him! Our man is so shaken up that he comes back to his senses and returns to his priestly vocation. He even volunteers to go to Africa as a missionary. He has been working there for several years and, despite his advanced age, and thanks to his good health, he continues to devote himself in parishes and at diocesan and even national levels, always at the service of the gospel and of the poor. God's ways are often strange: He writes straight with crooked lines!

Masses at the Mother Teresa Home

In Johannesburg, I always enjoy celebrating Mass at the Mother Teresa Home. On the second Sunday of the month, and once or twice a week, I celebrate with a dozen Missionary Sisters of Charity (their official name) and about twenty poor, sick and destitute people, rejected by society. There are about 100 residents, but many are too sick to join us. I especially like their celebrations of the great feasts of the liturgical year.

The joy expressed by singing and dancing to the sound of drums makes them forget that they are the poorest of the poor. Twice, I have the chance to celebrate Holy Thursday there; the washing of the feet especially is very touching. What also strikes me a lot is seeing the barefoot Sisters sitting on the floor on a simple mat, while their patients sit on benches.

I also have the chance to give a three-day retreat to the Sisters and a half-day recollection to the patients of their Home. I believe I am more evangelized by them than they are by me!

Among the Carmelites

In South Africa, on the first Sunday of the month, we celebrate Mass among the contemplative Carmelite Nuns who have their convent 20 kilometres from our home. There are only seven or eight of them. In this very westernized country, it is like in North America and Europe: very few vocations.

But, fortunately, about a hundred lay people participate in their Sunday Mass, embellished by lovely songs and musical instruments, including the kora¹⁹. It is a very prayerful liturgy. In 2015, on the 500th anniversary of the birth of Saint Teresa of Avila, their foundress, they produced a beautiful CD of liturgical songs.

Sister Marie at the Poor Clares

In Dedza, Malawi, a young woman, in her early twenties, is baptized after the required two years of catechumenate. A few

¹⁹ A 21 string West African instrument shaped like a lute and played like a harp.

days before her christening, she comes to talk. She says she feels called to give her life to the Lord in a religious vocation. She would like to join the Poor Clares, a contemplative order with strict rules of recluse life in silence. But the big problem is her family: all animists (traditional religion), they are totally opposed to losing their daughter in this way. They hardly granted her permission to be baptized. I encourage her to pray and, if she wants, I can go talk with her parents. After her baptism, I visit her parents who are not happy with the turn of events: their daughter has run away! She went to Lilongwe at the Poor Clares' Monastery.

Every time I go to Lilongwe, I visit her; she is very happy! After a year, she invites me to her first vows which will take place in a few months, and she asks me to bring her family. When the day comes, we are there with her parents and some of her brothers and sisters. They are impressed by the ceremony and how she looks happy. Thereafter, during the festivities, a beautiful reconciliation takes place. Today, Sister Marie is still in the convent, always smiling and happy.



**A long play recording
of the Malawi Poor Clares**

It is the Poor Clares of Lilongwe who, with the

help of our Canadian *confrère*, Claude Boucher, launched Malawian liturgical music with drums, African xylophones and other traditional instruments. The dances performed

during the celebrations are truly prayerful and fit for praising God.

CCCB catechism book

During my years in Ottawa, between 1984 and 1987, I have the opportunity to replace the Ottawa University chaplain a few times for Sunday Mass. The congregation is made up of students, lecturers and their families.

One day before Mass, a lady with a beautiful camera asks me if she can take pictures during Mass. She is sent by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB) to capture some scenes to illustrate a catechism book. It will help primary school children prepare for their First Communion. I agree, and she takes a few shots. A few months later, the catechism book is released for the 1986 school year. There are several photos, two of which show me celebrating Mass with the children around the altar and the parents in the background. To accompany this catechism book, a few



From the catechism book *In the Spirit we Belong*

posters are published as well, including one where I am at Mass with the children. I am pleased to have contributed a little to the advancement of catechism in the English speaking Canadian Church. Moreover, I am glad that, on the photos, there are also several Africans.

Fouine en Fête

Visiting our school in Toronto's Sacré Coeur Parish, some Catholic video production specialists ask me to take part in their film project about preparing young children for their First Communion. The focus is on a young girl, Nicole, with her classmates. The title of the film will be '*Fouine en Fête*'! *Fouine* is a cartoon weasel that pops up throughout the twenty minute film. It introduces Nicole and her friends, teachers, parents, myself, etc. We are filmed at school in catechism classes, in the church during the first Sacrament of Forgiveness, at the preparatory rehearsal and during Mass on the day of the great event. The filmmakers even go to the Nicole's house to film the parents and show how the preparation is done at family level.

This short film is now used in French-speaking Catholic schools throughout Ontario for the First Communion catechism and for parents' meetings in preparation for the sacrament.

A small fundamentalist church

In 1978, I spend nine months in Kenya, at the Gaba Pastoral Institute for English-speaking African countries. This is a truly rewarding year for a renewal in my way of thinking and

conceiving evangelisation and pastoral approaches according to varied environments and cultures.

One Sunday, after celebrating the Eucharist with the other participants, I cross the street in front of our Institute to join the *Kanisa ya Roho Mtakatifu* (Swahili for ‘Church of the Holy Spirit’), a small sect unknown to me. As we study religious syncretism in African countries, I think it is good to live a concrete experience. Arriving near their small clay wall and corrugated iron roof church, I start chatting with a young man who, to say the least, is full of enthusiasm. He invites me to enter with him and the other faithful. The first hymn begins with cheers and shouts to the loud beat of drums. After a few minutes, the crowd starts to dance and shout louder and louder; I can hardly follow their rhythm! Then, at after a while, some attendants close the only door and all the windows of the small church already poorly ventilated. It is getting hotter and hotter, and more and more suffocating! I ask my host why they have closed everything. "Because", he tells me, "the Holy Spirit has just entered, and we don't want him to run away!" I am stunned, but I stay until the end and join in their prayers. No miracle happens, other than the spirit of unity and enthusiasm that reigns in this small Christian assembly. Despite their naivety, I cannot help but see a certain level of faith in these people. But they certainly need more catechism!

Visit to Maasai land

During the same sabbatical year in Kenya, in my spare time, I walk in the villages around the Pastoral Institute and practice the Swahili language with the local people. During these

hikes, I occasionally meet an African from the Maasai tribe who is a security guard. The Maasai are proud warriors, hunters and herdsmen, and usually they are fearless. This Maasai invites me to visit his village, almost 300 kilometers from the Institute. As a long weekend is coming, we leave on a Friday afternoon to



With a *Moran*, (Maasaï warrior)

come back late the following Monday night. So I have the chance to see up close the life of the Maasai and to stay in a manyatta (house made of earth with a hardened cow dung floor). I drink blood fresh from the thigh of a cow, pierced slightly with an arrow and collected in a gourd. The village chief gives me permission to take some pictures (their belief is that the camera captures their soul!) as they prepare for an initiation ceremony for pubescent girls. I sleep on the cramped bed of this Maasai guard who boasts of being the only one in the village to have a bed in his little hut - he lives alone, very close to his family. On his bed, he occupies the side near the wall and leaves me the other half; during both

nights, I fall a few times off the bed! On Sunday morning, I celebrate Mass with a few villagers who are baptized. I ask my host to translate into Maasai what I say in Swahili (most faraway village dwellers do not know Swahili).

I detect in these simple people a deep sense of the sacred, certainly different from our own. For example, I am impressed by some of these people's rituals: in the morning when they get up, they spit toward the sun to thank God for the gift of life. Then the children go to the old men, bow their heads and receive a blessing from them who, one by one, imposes their hands on them! A very beautiful gesture full of meaning! Already the presence of the Creator is felt in these people not yet evangelized.

The following day, at the Pastoral Institute, our anthropology professor, who likes to tease, talks about hospitality in the different African tribes. "For example", he says, "when a visitor is passing through a Maasai village, the chief offers him the most beautiful young woman. Ask Michel, he was in a Maasai village over the weekend!" Everyone laughs, and I tell them what really happened! I believe that my host had to explain to the chief who I am, and as their ancestral customs require, a traditional priest has no relations with a woman a few days before and after the offering of the sacrifice. An African priest from another very traditionalist tribe one day explained to me that his non-Christian parents objected to him becoming a priest because they wanted to have grandchildren. He had tried every possible argument, but nothing convinced them. One day he explained to them that their own traditional priests refrain from relations with women when they offer sacrifices in order

to obtain rain, good harvests, good hunting, etc., which only happens at specific times during the year. But we Catholic priests offer the sacrifice every day, therefore we constantly abstain from sexual relations, according to our vow of chastity. The parents understood and gave him their consent!²⁰

A repair gone wrong... then well!

In our South Africa Sector House, we often receive visitors and occasionally *confrères* who come for treatment in this country's high-rated hospitals. One day, a *confrère* from Malawi is with us, recovering from a back surgery. I decide to install a support bar in the shower so he can have a hold while washing. I have to drill six holes in the wall. Everything is going fine, but when drilling the sixth hole, a jet of water surges with such pressure I get completely soaked! I punctured a pipe! After turning off the water, I call a plumber. Two men, arrive within half an hour, one White and one Black. They must break the cement in order to repair the damaged pipe. The White man explains to me that he himself is an apprentice and that it is the Black man who is the '*fundi*' ('expert' in Bantu languages), teaching him plumbing. Seeing him work, we understand that the Black man is the real expert! Interesting, when we consider how South African society is still suffering from many years of apartheid.

²⁰ This does not mean that I am for or against married clergy. But this topic goes beyond the scope of this book.

Amnesty International in action

In Malawi, I befriend an English couple who lived in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). They had to leave that country before being sent away by president Mugabe's totalitarian regime. But their son, an officer in the army, had to stay behind because he was jailed for 'political crimes' - that he did not commit. We decide to write to Amnesty International asking for help. We entrust the letter to a *confrère* who leaves for Europe in a few days. Mailed from here, it could be intercepted by the Police Secret Services of the country, then under the dictatorship of Kamuzu Banda; they could seize the letter, trace us and make trouble for us and for his parents as well, perhaps even kick us out of the country. The *confrère* in question will post the letter in Europe. A few months later, very discretely, the son of the couple is released and repatriated to England. We are convinced that this is due to the intervention of Amnesty International, which always acts with the utmost discretion.

Insisting on justice

We must always act in order to obtain more justice and respect for human dignity; this is an integral part of the Gospel message.

In Johannesburg, I attend the annual general meeting of the Justice Commission of the South Africa Conference of Catholic Bishops. At one such meeting, during the question period, I raise my hand and say: "In the Government of South Africa, one of the ministries is called 'The Ministry for Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities'. How can we

accept such terminology? The terms we use reflect our mentality and inspire our thoughts and actions. You, from the Justice Commission, through your Political Liaison Officer, please, try to pressure the government to change that appellation. With all due respect to people with disabilities, do you not think it would be better to include them in the Ministry of Health and have a special Ministry for 'Women and the Family' or for 'Gender Equality'?" Then, the host of the evening simply replies: "Thank you for your question. Next one!" and I remain speechless!

One year later, I attend the same assembly! I get up and ask the same question, reminding them how I was answered the year before without taking my question into account! The assembly begins to whisper while the hosts express embarrassment! And this time, after my presentation, I am thanked and they promise to do something about it. Unfortunately, after checking on the South Africa Government website, I see the wording is still the same. I wish someone else would take over and continue to campaign to change the name!

A young "soldier"

He was not a real soldier, fortunately! But after his arrival in Nairobi, Mark still walks like a soldier! He is only ten years old, but he had to walk many months with a few soldiers, running away from his war-torn country. When he arrives here, he is adopted by a good parishioner who takes care of him like her own son. After a few weeks among the youths of the parish, he gets used to walking normally! He becomes more and more involved in the youth club and befriends

several of them. These friendships continue until today. Now an adult, he has become a successful businessman and has a lovely family.

Renewing marriage vows

In Toronto in 2002, I have the chance to bless the marriage of a couple who have always remained in my circle of friends. He is a Jew and she is a staunch Catholic. Their love is unshakable! Ten years later, they both want me to help them renew their marriage vows, but I am in South Africa. After notifying me via the internet, we agree on the day and time. So, through Skype, we do this little ceremony ending with a blessing... separated by a distance of 13,300 kilometers, from Johannesburg to Toronto! God's blessings are intercontinental, and even universal.

A few months before publishing this book, I celebrate with them their eighteenth anniversary in Toronto.

Cursillo

In South Africa, I am involved with the *Cursillo*, a movement spread in more than sixty countries around the world. It is a long weekend (Thursday evening to Sunday afternoon) and it offers a "little course" ("*cursillo*" in Spanish) for adults. It is made up of fifteen talks given by the accompanying priest and lay leaders committed to their Christian life and who have been members of the movement for at least a few years. The priest gives five of these talks, presides over the daily Eucharist and gives the sacrament of reconciliation to all who want it, which often takes us late at night. All these talks are based on the personal experiences of

the speakers: the gospel lived in everyday life, not theory! These are very demanding weekends, and I always come out exhausted, but very happy to have been able to witness God's action in these men and women already full of life experience. Often we see real conversions taking place. After the weekend, there are follow-up meetings where cursillistas (those who have lived the weekend) from the same area meet in turn at each other's home. They are also involved in society and in the Church to help as needed. Some of our African seminarians have lived such an experience and have come out very impressed to see these lay people, especially the men, spending time in silence worshipping the Blessed Sacrament or praying the Rosary! Especially the testimonies of life struck them a lot.

Shepherd attacked by a lion

I am visiting the sick at the Dedza district hospital in Malawi; I approach the bed of a young man lying on his side. He seems to be in pain. I ask him what happened. He explains that while he was guarding his goats, a lion appeared. As he tried to drive back the lion by shouting and gesticulating, the beast began to run after him. He then climbed into a tree, and the lion hit him with its paw, scratching him badly on the posterior. Fortunately, other shepherds came running and were able to chase away the lion, not without a fight with their sticks! It is very rare for lions to maraud in this place. Fortunately, after a few days, this 'good shepherd' feels much better and can go back home!

"Father Michael, you slept during Mass!"

One day, after a solemn mass celebrated by a bishop, some children come to me and say with a mischievous smile: "Father Michael, you were sleeping during Mass, while the bishop preached!" I laugh at their remark because I know they want to tease me; I often tell the youths to be attentive at Mass and to listen well to the homily. I therefore explain to them that I was listening carefully; to do so, I often close my eyes in order to better focus on what I hear. I remind them of the story I once told them during a youth mass: a Catholic boy is visiting his Protestant friend whose father is a rich farmer. The father says to the Catholic boy, "I will give you this horse if you can pray the 'Our Father' from start to finish without interruption." Then the boy begins, distracted and looking around: "Our Father who are in heaven...", then he suddenly stops when he sees the saddle, and he asks, "Are you going to give me the saddle as well?" The father laughs and replies: "You see: you failed! You interrupted your prayer!" The children remember the story and conclude themselves: "Yes, it is true: if he had closed his eyes, he would not have been distracted and would have continued to the end; so he would have won the horse!" Protestants often pray with their eyes closed; we could take a lesson from them.

Crossing the equator

During my years in Kenya, I occasionally cross the equator. On some roads more frequented by tourists, the place is well marked by a sign saying, *"You are now crossing the equator"*. People like to stop and take pictures. Often, we meet kids who

attract tourists to give them a small demonstration, for a few pennies. They display a bucket full of water on which float a few twigs of dry grass. When they put the pail a few metres south of the equator line, the twigs rotate slowly in one direction; when they move it a few metres to the north, they rotate in the other direction. It seems that this phenomenon is due to the geomagnetic field of our planet earth (see the Coriolis effect in Wikipedia). A simple way for these kids to make a few pennies, without having to beg!

Children who 'repair' the roads

Secondary roads in rural Africa take a hit during the rainy season. Sometimes the potholes even become the size of small basins and even worse! On some roads, we must keep our speed to a minimum so the car suspension will not break! Sometimes we meet young boys who, while having fun, are busy filling the holes with makeshift shovels. It is obvious that these 'repairs' will not last long, yet we give them a few pennies to reward them. They are happy to have earned a little money, fruit of their work. Again, it is better than getting used to begging.

Floods in Mozambique

Mozambique is a beautiful country I have visited a few times. Unfortunately, it is often flooded. In 2000 and 2013 there were terrible 'deluges' that destroyed several houses, villages and cultivated fields. In March and April 2019, there were two cyclones, one after the other. Each time thousands of people are displaced and many drown. One of our very devoted *confrères* was caught in the middle of such a flood

and he had to spend three days and three nights in a tree, tied with his belt to a branch so he would not fall while sleeping! What a story! He still loves Mozambique, and although he is back home for health reasons, he remains in touch with the people of his adopted country.

An old woman's simple faith

As I am staying in an outstation church for a few days, one afternoon the catechist takes me to baptise an elderly woman who is dying. She has been trying for some years to learn the tenets of our faith, but the catechist tells me : "Don't be too demanding on her: her brains have dried up and she cannot learn anything!" Being still a young priest, I think she should know at least the sign of the cross. So I ask her to do it. She is so weak I have to hold her arm and we start together: "In the name of the Father..." and I let her finish by herself, but instead of saying "...and of the Holy Spirit", she says: "...and of the mother". I tell her that it is not the mother, but the Holy Spirit! She starts again and repeats once more: "...and of the mother". I become impatient and I tell her firmly that she should say: "the Holy Spirit"! Then she looks at me and in a feeble voice, she says: "I don't know how it works with you, white people, but with us, Africans, if we want a son, we need not only a father, but also a mother!" The people around, the catechist and I chuckle! Changing tactic, I ask her why she wants to be baptised. She answers beautifully: "I am so tired, I just want to go rest with God!" What a beautiful sign of faith! I therefore baptise her, and I am sure she is now resting in God's loving embrace!

A policeman and his Bible

In Malawi, as diocesan school chaplain, I often travel between Dedza and Ntcheu, about an hour's drive on a newly built tarmac road. One day, a policeman makes me stop for a routine inspection. As I speak to him in Chichewa, he realizes that I am a '*bambo*' (Catholic priest). He takes out his Bible and starts asking the meaning of some texts. After about ten minutes, he seems satisfied and asks me to bless him.

From that day on, every time I pass, he recognizes my car and beckons me to stop. With his Bible in his hand, he asks me some more questions about certain texts, and we talk for about ten minutes. He even forgets the routine questions about my driver's license and other usual details. He also forgets to stop other cars!

A benevolent policeman

One Sunday morning in Nairobi, I have just finished the first Mass at the parish. After being delayed by several people who want to talk, I hurry up to go celebrate another Mass at the Police Academy about ten kilometers away. I must take the main road to the international airport. Fortunately, on Sunday morning, there is little traffic. Suddenly a policeman with his hand held radar is waving me to stop. I greet him in Swahili and he shows me on his radar, that I was definitely driving too fast! He asks me why. I tell him that I am going to celebrate Mass at the Police Academy. So he steps back, gives me a military salute and says, "Hurry up, Padre! Otherwise you'll be late! But drive carefully!" May the Lord bless him and his family!

Evangelization at the swimming pool

In Johannesburg, our house is a ten-minute walk away from a well-maintained public swimming pool. I go two or three times a week. I have noticed a man in his forties who comes there regularly, but he walks with crutches. One day I greet him and start a conversation. He became paralyzed after an attack by armed robbers in his house. A bullet damaged his spine, and since then he has been in rehabilitation; he must do a lot of physical exercise, including swimming.

In turn, he enquires about me. I tell him I am a Catholic missionary priest. So, he says, "Ah! How can we believe in a God who allows children to suffer and die unjustly!" I look him in the eye and say, "Paul, you are a good man, and God loves you very much!" "Why are you telling me that?" he says, astonished. "Because, I answer, I expected you to blame God for your misfortune, but you feel sorry for suffering children. You have a good heart, Paul, and God will reward you. You may not believe in God, but he believes in you!" Since that day, Paul has always been courteous and smiling, and I am sure God is working slowly in his heart. His physical condition has really improved.

Mass on the radio and my cell phone

In Johannesburg, I often celebrate Mass at *Radio Veritas*, the only Catholic radio station in the country. One day, during my short homily, my cell phone starts ringing! I forgot to turn it off! Immediately, the sound controller plays a soft music while I turn off my device. Then I apologize to the listeners and resume my short comment on the gospel.

Dogs on *Radio Veritas*

Another time, I am giving a radio interview over the phone from my room. Suddenly, the neighbours' dogs start barking and howling: a real concert! I quickly apologize, close the window and continue the interview. Some days later, I meet the dogs' owners, and I tease them, saying, "Did you know that your dogs were on the radio? They even gave a nice concert!" Seeing their surprise, I laugh and explain to them what happened. They are puzzled and they apologize! But I reassure them that everything ended well and that it added a note of joy and realism to the interview!

My 40-year jubilee

In 2010, I am on leave for two months in Canada. We take this opportunity to celebrate my forty years of priesthood. My family and some friends prepare a beautiful eucharistic celebration to be followed by a reception. Before Mass, I consult my fellow priests who are here to celebrate with me, and we all agree on a point that I will explain before the reception.

So, at the end of mass, I tell people that we priests are not going to sit at the high table; we will sit here and there among the guests. But since all the seats are well counted and the space is limited, we have to fill the chairs at the high table. "Who would Jesus put at the high table?" I ask. A little hesitant, someone replies: "The children!" "Yes, of course!" So I invite parents to place their children at the high table, in front of everyone! "The one who makes himself as little as this little child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mt 18:4)

Abundance and super-abundance

Africa is gradually developing; we see more and more rich people, but also people living in extreme poverty; I have seen a great variety of people: rich, poor and destitute. Many times, during my holidays in Canada, when my family and friends ask me, "When you come from Africa, you must find that we live in abundance?" Sometimes I answer a little sarcastically, "No, not in abundance, but in super-abundance!"

It is true that there is a lot of corruption and injustice among political leaders and those who hold the strings of economic power in Africa. Unfortunately, it is often the same here.

Lucy

Today, April 7, 2019, I receive a phone call from South Africa announcing Lucy's death. I become sad, but at the same time I thank the Lord. Lucy was only 30 years old! For the past few months, she has been in a critical medical condition. Thanks to some Sisters and Emily, a consecrated holy woman, she was able to be helped for the last 6 or 7 years of her life. Here is a summary of her story.

She was born in a big city in Africa, and since childhood, her family treated her like a witch; scarcely fed, she had to sleep on the bare floor. As soon as she reached puberty, her mother sent her into prostitution to earn money on the streets. Besides, she has never gone to school.

As a teenager, she wants to get out of that life. She starts a small business, selling stuff on a busy street. One day, as a young adult, some of her family members already living in Johannesburg send her a plane ticket to come join them,

promising her the moon and the stars in this great modern city of South Africa. Innocently, she comes over, and as soon as she arrives, they force her to 'work' as a stripper in a chic night club for rich men and sex tourists. Despite herself, she learns to become an object of pleasure for all those perverted men. She is made drunk before the show to take away inhibition. Thank God, she never took drugs. She makes a lot of money but spends everything in gambling. Yet she remains a believer and regularly goes to church on Sundays. One day, she asks the parish secretary for the contact of a priest who speaks French. After trying a few times to contact another priest who does not answer his phone, she calls me and I agree to see her. She explains to me without embarrassment what she does as a 'profession'. "But," she says, "I fail to have a reliable and permanent relationship with these men. I am looking for someone with whom I can have a sincere and lasting romantic relationship, and then start a family." Then she tells me she wants to have me! I am surprised and just tell her that it is impossible; I am a priest and I promised God I would remain celibate for life. She is very disappointed, but I tell her that if she wants to change her life, I can try to help her meet the greatest lover: Jesus. Very upset, she leaves, telling me that Jesus understands what she is doing to survive. A few days later, she calls me back and tells me she wants to change her life. I put her in touch with some Sisters who provide her with lodging and boarding, in exchange of some house cleaning services. She learns to pray and to confide in God. She completely stops going to shabby places.

With the help of Emily, the consecrated woman mentioned above, we put her in touch with a lady psychologist whom she

continues to see regularly for a few years. She has a lot of problems controlling her emotions. She is very unstable and even tries to commit suicide (following story). Her family members, who brought her to South Africa, only want to take every opportunity to exploit and ridicule her. She really has no support from them; all are in this infamous sex trade and encourage her to return to 'work'. They just want to take advantage of her.

Lucy goes to adult school and learns to read and write. She gets a few small jobs that do not last. She has a good heart: she is easily moved by misery and is always ready to help. Several times she takes used clothes to Mother Teresa's children's home.

In the last months of her life, she becomes ill with a virulent cancer. Emily tells me that recently she has begun to deepen her faith and that "something serious is going on in her heart". A priest saw her twice in hospital. I am sure she is now in heaven. Jesus said to the Pharisees: "Prostitutes will precede you in the kingdom of God" (Matthew 21:31)

Today, Lucy, you've been freed from all your problems. The Lord has welcomed you in his kingdom; let Mother Mary envelop you with her maternal love. Pray for your family and for all victims of human trafficking.

Attempted suicide

One Monday morning, Lucy (preceding story) calls me and starts crying over the phone: "Last night, I tried to take my own life!" she says. She explains that she walked on the sidewalk of a bridge crossing over a busy highway between Johannesburg and Pretoria. She knew that on Sunday

evenings between 8 pm and 11 pm, very few people cross that bridge, let alone pedestrians. She was planning to throw herself down where a car would certainly have hit her to death (the speed limit on the main highways in South Africa is 120 km/h). "But last night", she says, "people kept passing non-stop, especially pedestrians in groups or in pairs". Some were telling her to go home before something bad happened to her (there is a lot of crime in that area). So, around 11 pm, seeing that people were still passing by, she decided to go home.

Then, I make her reflect on her experience, "Who sent all these people?... Was it not God who allowed them to be signs that he wanted to keep you alive?" And guess what! It was the beginning of the Suicide Prevention Week in South Africa! I give her the phone number of the suicide hotline, which she writes in her mobile phone. She will never make such an attempt again.

Tonia

Another very troubled young woman comes to me after Mass in a large parish. She is in disarray because Social Services have taken away her 10-year-old daughter on the pretext that she is not taking good care of her. She tells me how much she suffered in her native country, going to prison for her involvement against her government's dictatorial policies. She was later raped and gave birth to a daughter. The father is here but does not live with her; neither does he take care of the child. This child is currently in an orphanage where, according to Tonia, she suffers a lot. She says that, in that place, children are being mistreated and groomed to be sold outside the country (human trafficking). I have my doubts

about this, but anything is possible! After enquiry, we find out it is not true!

Nevertheless, I manage to find for the girl a place in an orphanage run by Sisters. Through other nuns, I contact a Catholic lawyer, very committed in her faith. She is part of a distinguished law firm. She agrees to defend Tonia in a court of law. After several family court appearances, Tonia finally gets custody of her daughter. But we believe more and more that she suffers from paranoia. She is, therefore, under the supervision of Social Services. Fortunately, she has a small job that allows her to earn enough to live with her daughter. She continues to fight and confide in some nuns who encourage her in her difficult life.

An abused woman and her children

One Monday morning, while I am alone in our Nairobi parish, a white woman knocks at my office. She explains her problem. Her husband is an Arab with whom she had two children who are still small. She suffers a lot and she wants to run away with her children. She wants to return home to England, but her husband took away her passport. He works for a big company, and right now he is at work.

I am puzzled, so I go to our Parish Centre to call Sister Ruth, director of the sewing school. She joins me in my office, and together with the woman, we discuss a strategy in order to help her. The Sister takes her in her car and collects her suitcases and some other travel effects already packed in her house. Then they pick up the two children from the Daycare Centre. Sister Ruth goes back to her school, and here I am alone with this mother and her two small children, aged 2 and

4! On Monday, our cook is off, so I ask this lady to take charge of the kitchen and prepare us a meal. Meanwhile, I return to my office to think and plan. I call the MSOLA, and their Provincial tells me that their cook's house is empty. I take the mother and the two children who will have to spend almost two weeks hiding in that house, situated far away, in another part of the city.

Meanwhile, we embark on a long process in order to recover the mother's passport, which also contains the two children's documents. I make frequent visits to the office of the British High Commissioner, where I am granted a parking permit on their private property. The High Commissioner will demand that the passport be returned to their Office; the husband will have to give it back, as the mother and the children are British citizens. After several days of proceedings, - among other things, visits to the Kenyan immigration office with the mother wearing a veil for fear of being recognized - finally, the High Commissioner calls me: he has retrieved the passport!

Thanks to an emergency fund from the MSOLA, we buy the plane tickets and finally, after all those exhausting procedures, in the middle of the night we take the mother and her children to the airport. She has disguised herself and her children not to be recognized. With the Provincial of the MSOLA, we get permission to go to the VIP section to wait for the departure time. Indeed, we fear the husband might hunt them down. Finally, in the middle of the night, this little family finally flies to their freedom!

A few weeks later, an English MSOLA goes home on leave. She manages to find this lady and her two children in a refuge

for abused women. It seems that her husband came to England, but without having the required documents; he was immediately sent back to Kenya!

Mary Rose and her miracle

A few months before I leave Kenya in 1994, a lady from Uganda comes to my parish in Nairobi. She asks me to pray for her and her family and give them a special blessing. She and her five children managed to escape from their country where her husband was killed by Idi Amin Dada's soldiers; in a few days, with her children, she will leave for Canada. The whole family is sponsored by some Toronto Sisters. After blessing her, I wish her a good journey and good luck in Canada with her children. Then, I lose track of her.

In 1996, before travelling to Toronto, I spend a few days in Ottawa where I visit a Ugandan family I have known during my three years in the nation's capital (1984-1987). The lady tells me about a friend who recently arrived from Uganda and now lives in Toronto with her children. After some explanation, I realize that it is Mary Rose whom I met for barely 15 minutes in Nairobi a few years ago! She gives me her phone number, and a few weeks later, after arriving in Toronto, we talk over the phone. What a surprise!

A month later, she invites me to celebrate the feast of Pentecost in her parish. I go and join her parish priest who tells me how committed Mary Rose and her children are in the parish. During the Mass, the whole family performs a beautiful liturgical dance with singing and African music. Mary Rose and her children are always ready to help, the priest tells me. She has managed to find a job as a hospital

attendant and soon she can support her family. The two older children have found small jobs and help make ends meet.

Unfortunately, she hurts her back, and she cannot work anymore. One day, she calls me and tells me what has just happened to her. Her landlord gave her an ultimatum to pay the month rent of \$700. She really does not know what to do. Some of her friends from a Pentecostal church tell her that if she joins them with her family, their church will pay for her. She really does not want to, but seeing no other solution, she goes to her parish to pray in the church, for a last time, she thinks. She spends a good time praying, then she lays her rosary on the bench saying : "Goodbye, Mary! In the other church where I am going, I will not find you, but I will find your Son Jesus." Then she leaves the church, crosses the street to wait for the bus. She sees a graffiti on a wall of the bus shelter, that says, "Give Jesus a second chance"; then on the other wall, she sees the same thing, and on the third wall as well! She then thinks that these are fanatical fundamentalist Christians who wrote this! Finally, the bus arrives, but she realises that she does not have the exact change to pay! So she lets the bus pass by and she crosses the street to go ask the parish secretary for change; but first she decides to enter the church again; she still prays a whole rosary following the same pattern as the first time! Then, when she goes to the secretary, the latter says, "Oh! It's you, Mary Rose! There is an envelope here for you." She takes it and opens it to discover... \$700 ! ... no word of explanation! She cannot believe it! With tears in her eyes, she asks the secretary, "But where did you get this?" The secretary says, "Someone came

by a few minutes ago and left it. I was busy on the phone and writing down messages; I didn't notice who it was!"

Mary Rose returns in the church, takes back her rosary and prays, weeping and thanking God for this 'angel' whom he has kindly sent to her. To this day, she does not know where that envelope came from!

Brother Max

In Uganda, under the dictatorial regime of Idi Amin Dada (1971-1979), soldiers can be ruthless and often cruel and dangerous. One day, Brother Max, a Swiss M.Afr., is returning from the capital Kampala in his truck loaded with building materials. At a roadblock, he is stopped by a group of armed soldiers. They suspect everybody of carrying arms and ammunition. Brother Max simply invites them to search his car. After doing so, they continue threatening him, probably in order to receive some money as a bribe, but Brother insists that he has no weapons or ammunition. As they still insist harshly, he gently takes his rosary hanging from the rear-view mirror, and shows it to them, saying with a firm voice: "Here are my weapons and ammunition." Then, speechless, the soldiers slowly walk back and beckon him to leave!

The "Rainmaker"

During my years of service in Ottawa, between 1984 and 1987, I get to know Father Rémigius McCoy. Born in Gatineau in 1898, he is still working in Ghana, despite his old age. He comes to Canada every year for a month's rest and medical care. His home base is our community, but he is busy

with doctor's appointments, family visits and his circles of friends. He passes away in August 1993 at the venerable age of 95.

In Ghana, he still has a reputation of saving the crops of the people of his parish and of the surrounding region. Indeed, at some point, as there is a very strong drought, many people go to the local sorcerers to implore the spirits to bring in the rain. But Father McCoy conducts prayers throughout his parish and after a few days, the rains begin! This earns him the nickname "rainmaker"! He recounts this episode in his book *'Great Things Happen'* (from the title of the hymn *'Great Things Happen When God Mixes With Us'*)

Fr. McCoy is a holy man and a staunch missionary-priest. Every time he goes back to Africa, on the day of his departure he asks me to hear his confession! He is twice my age, but he insists on making his confession on his knees by my side. I feel small in front of this giant of missionary apostolate!

WYD in Toronto and Sydney

I had the chance to participate in two World Youth Days. The first one in Toronto (July 23-28, 2002). More than 400,000 pilgrims from 70 countries gather to celebrate their faith. The Mass with Pope John Paul II brings nearly 800,000 faithful. Something interesting happens on the morning of the papal Mass at Downsview Park. It rained all night, and the ground is soaked. Around 9:30 am, a few minutes before the arrival of the Pope, the sun rises from behind the clouds. Within half an hour, the ground becomes almost completely dry!

This WYD event is a great opportunity for me to prepare for my departure for Angola at the beginning of August, as I welcome a delegation of youths from this country with their chaplain, and I prepare to see them in their home country in a few days.

The second WYD I attend is in Sydney, Australia (July 15 to 20, 2008), more than 200,000 participants are present, and at the final Mass with Pope Benedict XVI, there are more than 300,000 people! I sometimes like to joke about singing in the famous Sydney Opera House! On the eve of the official opening, all priests must go there to register and receive a special stole with the symbols of the Sydney WYD. As there are so many of us and having to wait for such a long time, we start singing hymns known to everyone! That is how I say that I sang in this famous opera house!

When my turn comes, unfortunately there are no more of these beautiful stoles. But on the last day, after the papal Mass, I meet an Australian priest who asks me how I feel about this WYD. After telling him how impressed I am with the whole organization, and the great and spontaneous expressions of faith, I add that I have only one regret: I could not get a stole to take back as a souvenir! Immediately he digs into his hand bag, pulls out his WYD stole and gives it to me! I protest politely, but he assures me that he will be able to get another one later.

I am also very grateful to this young Kenyan couple who have received me so well in their house. Both were in my youth group when I was in Nairobi. He works as a manager at a major multinational corporation, and she is a professor at the university. One evening, we celebrate a Mass in Swahili in

their home with a dozen others of their Kenyan friends. I am so pleased to see how much most of these young professionals are engaged in their respective parishes.

On the day of the Pope's departure, we are all at the airport. The Australian Prime Minister, at the end of his farewell speech, jokingly says to the Pope: "And now, your holiness, we entrust you to our flying kangaroo!" (indeed, *Qantas* airplanes display a painting of a kangaroo, the emblem of Australia)!

An original *Confrère*!

I have been blessed to live in community with several interesting *confrères*. But there are some who have stood out more than others. Maurice was one of them. I told him that he was not born with the original sin, but with the sin of 'originality'! He laughed and said he agreed! Yes, he was really original. Here are some examples.

He dresses very simply, with old, very wide baggy trousers, and walks with his hands in his pockets, and very often whistling; the parishioners call him "the whistler"! He often goes for a walk in the nearby park where he likes to chat with homeless people. Sometimes at dinner, we notice he does not eat much and we ask him why he's not hungry. Then he tells us that he has eaten with the itinerant people some sandwiches provided by the Salvation Army!

One day, during the evening meal, he tells us with a laugh that police officers stopped him three times during the afternoon to check his identity: they were looking for an elderly man who looks like him, and who escaped from a residence for people suffering from dementia and

Alzheimer's! In the evening, watching the news on TV, Maurice laughs when he sees his lookalike finally found by the police!

The parishioners love him. That is why one day, during a Seniors' dinner, I do not hesitate to tell the following little story that I have made up from scratch: it is the season of Lent and I tell people that Maurice likes to pray the way of the cross in the church. After the seventh station, he goes into the church lobby, dips his comb into holy water, and combs his hair. Why? Because the next station is "Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem"! Everyone laughs, and Maurice laughs even louder!

He likes sardines... but warms them up in the frying pan! Imagine the smell! And besides, he chooses Sunday morning to eat some at breakfast! The foul odour spreads throughout the house and into the sacristy! We manage to convince him to choose another day of the week when there are less people passing through the house between the church and the office! He has a good character, loves to laugh and is loved by all.

Our domestic worker and her cataracts

Our cook and housekeeper in our Johannesburg community suffers from cataracts in both eyes. She is on a surgery waiting list of a large public hospital in the city. The list is so long that she would have to wait five years! So, we decide to help her go to a private clinic. Thanks to donations from some benefactors, we raise the necessary funds. After both surgeries, she sees so much better that there is a big improvement, especially in the cleanliness of the house! This

is very important, as our residence is the sector house where several *confrères* and visitors come regularly.

Charity and her first salary

A mother from a poor African country who is a refugee in Canada with her many children, and who has suffered a lot, has finally found a good job allowing her to live decently. Upon receiving her first salary, she insists on giving me half of it because of the help I have given her since she arrived. I am really touched by this gesture. I want to refuse, but she insists so much, saying that God will bless her even more. I know that in the African mentality, one cannot refuse a gift. So, I accept. In the following years, I see that God blesses her and her family. Now they are doing very well in their newly adopted country.

Blind and Witness to Jesus

One evening in my Toronto office, I am preparing my homily for next Sunday, and I get an idea. I call Fidelia, the blind young African lady who arrived a few years ago. She is very active and devoted in our African Catholic Community. Over the phone, I explain to her that at next Sunday's Mass, we will read the Gospel of Bartimaeus, the blind man whom Jesus healed (Mark 10: 46-52), and that I thought she could give a testimony of her faith as a blind person. Immediately she answers: "You know, Father, I would do anything for the Lord! " Enthusiastically, she adds: "Would you like me to read the Gospel too? I have a Bible in Braille." I accept and give her the Gospel reference so she may prepare the reading.

Come the following Sunday, I explain to the congregation that Fidelia is going to read the Gospel in Braille and give us a testimony. The people are listening so intensely you could hear a pin drop! I remember two strong points from her witness:

Addressing the congregation, she says, "I am sure you could tell me, 'Fidelia, if you have such a strong faith, do like Bartimaeus: ask God and he will heal you!' I do ask him every day", she says. "But I always end my prayer by these words: 'God, you are my loving daddy and you love me so much; you know what is best for me, your daughter, so, please, just do what you see fit for me; not what I want, but what you want!'"

The second point I remember her saying, is this: she tells the congregation, "I became blind at the age of 24. And now I see better than before because I see with the eyes of my heart."

This testimony is a great lesson for all of us. I could never give such a poignant and concrete homily; Fidelia has testified from what she is living in her deep relationship with God.

She is now happily married with a good husband, and the mother of three beautiful children who have great respect for her. When they are mischievous and she scolds them, they ask her how she knows they have been naughty, since she cannot see. She simply answers, "My Guardian Angel tells me when you do something wrong! "

Cinema in schools and villages

While I am high school chaplain in Malawi, thanks to a donation from a generous benefactor, I buy a 16mm cinema projector (video projectors do not exist yet). But before buying it, I ask myself if it is necessary; is it not a luxury? I

see so much poverty all around; would the money not be better used in helping people in need? I discuss with my *confrères* and with Sister Bedet to weigh the pros and cons. Finally, with all this wisdom put together, we decide to buy it. It is mostly Sr. Bedet's argument that makes me reflect: "It depends on the needs"! Yes, there is a great need for a modern way to make Jesus and the gospel better known. After buying the projector, other benefactors give us the film *Jesus of Nazareth* of Zeffirelli, then *The Acts of the Apostles* of Rossellini. Later, I receive the film *Something Beautiful for God* about Mother Teresa, directed by Malcolm Muggeridge of the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), who converted after living a few months with this saint of the poor. In addition, I inherit some *Charlie Chaplin* films that I show at the beginning of the evening while waiting for the latecomers. People love 'Charlie' so much that after a while they are never late anymore!

Since there is no electricity in villages and in countryside high schools, I get a small generator to power the projector. People love these movie nights, especially young people. Television is not yet widespread here, and open-air cinema is quite an event, especially for boarding school students.

One day I meet a prominent Muslim from the small town of Ntcheu; he tells me that he attended the film projection the day before. What touched him most was the multiplication of the bread and the fish! From that day, this rich man has become more generous towards the poor. So, I tell myself that the message is quietly getting through.

Of course, most of the films are in English. That is why I give some explanations in Chichewa using a microphone plugged into the projector that includes a powerful and

detachable speaker. I also borrow films from different embassies when I go to the capital city. There are some of very good quality, even in Mandarin (with English subtitles) from the Taiwanese Embassy. Between entertainment films, I show some educational films about hygiene, agriculture, etc.

One evening, during a film, one spectator shouts aloud: "A snake!" The crowd springs to its feet and runs away in a stampede! Happily, no one is hurt nor bitten, and the poor snake crawled away in panic!

Community Life vs. Loneliness

In the Society of the White Fathers (M.Afr.), we place a great emphasis on community life. Our Founder, Cardinal Lavigerie, insisted: "Always three, rarely two, never alone!" It is not always easy, like married life and family life, for that matter! Character differences can sometimes lead to conflict. But, at the end of the day, it is the best way to live our ideal of consecrated life.

A diocesan priest I knew in Toronto was ordained at an advanced age after the death of his wife. One day, he confides in me: "For me, what is most difficult in the life of a diocesan priest is to find myself alone in the evening in the rectory, after a long and exhausting day. I was used to be with my wife and children." Another argument for married clergy? In the meantime, up with community life!

"What is a Sister?"

One day, Sister Bédet and I are with a family. The four-year-old boy, hearing that Bédet is a Sister, approaches her

and asks: "What is a Sister?" How do you answer this question to such a young child ? Bédet is not thrown off track, on the contrary. She kindly pulls the child close by and, giving him a hug, simply says: "A Sister is a woman who loves Jesus and little children very much!" The little boy, happy and smiling, goes back to play. In doing so, Sister Bédet knew how to touch his heart and the hearts of his parents.

New Year's Blessing

On the first day of a new year in Malawi, I preside over Mass assisted by Father Roland Vezeau, M.Afr. At the end of the celebration, I explain to the people an old custom, unfortunately fallen into disuse, of my home country: every New Year's Day, the whole family would gather around the father and receive his blessing for the New Year. And I add this: "As Father Vezeau studied with my late father in college, he became a bit like my second father here." So, kneeling before him, I ask him to bless me. Filled with emotions, he blesses me in front of the assembly who reacts by applauding! Also wanting to show them the importance of the woman, I tell them how the mother of the family continues the same custom after the death of the father.

CONCLUSION

I have been fortunate to work in several countries, especially in societies where there was a relative peace and a rather good understanding between different ethnic groups. While there were injustices committed by government leaders, in general, as a Church and in a spirit of dialogue, we were able to help address some basic problems to bring more justice for the poor. I thank the Lord for my good health and for never having been in serious danger of death like some of my *confrères* working in countries at war or living in the midst of socio-political conflicts. Risks and stress have sometimes seriously affected them for the rest of their lives. Some even died martyrs, like our four *confrères* beatified on December 8, 2018 in Algeria along with fifteen others from different religious congregations.

Certainly, in my life as a missionary, there have been more difficult times. Being naturally rather positive and optimistic, I wanted to report in this book the most memorable and positive events. These facts come back to my mind more easily.

After reading these stories, sometimes quite disparate, I hope that you now have a better idea of what the daily life of a missionary in action can be in a faraway country and in his country of origin. I want to thank you all who have contributed to my missionary life, from near or far. Without you, I would not have been able to do a quarter of what I have achieved. You have been missionaries with me. Because, as Christians *we are all missionaries*, that is, 'sent' as per our baptism. Do so and your life will be *NEVER A BORING MOMENT!*

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Thanks to all of you,
this project has come to light!

UNITED IN THE SAME MISSION !

ANNEX

WHAT COLOUR IS GOD'S SKIN?

(My theme song)

1. Goodnight", I said to my little son,
So tired out when the day was done,
Then he said as I tucked him in:
"Tell me, daddy, What colour's God's skin?"

CH: **What colour is God's skin? (X2)**

I said: "it's black, brown,

It's yellow, it is red, it is white,

Everyone's the same in the Good Lord's sight".

2. He looked at me with his shining eyes,
I knew I could tell no lies
When he said: "Daddy, why do the different races fight
If we're all the same in the Good Lord's sight?"
3. "Son, that is part of our suffering past,
But the whole human family is learning
at last
That the thing we missed on the road
we trod
Is to walk as the daughters and the sons
of God."
4. These words to Canada²¹ a man once
hurled:
God is our last chance to make a world,
The different races are meant to be
Our strength and glory from sea to sea."



²¹ I change according to the country I am in: South Africa, Kenya, Malawi, etc...

For more information :

Missionaries of Africa (White Fathers) : <https://mafrome.org>

Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa (White Sisters)
<http://www.msolafrica.org>

Montreal *Afrika Centre* website: www.centreafrica.net

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