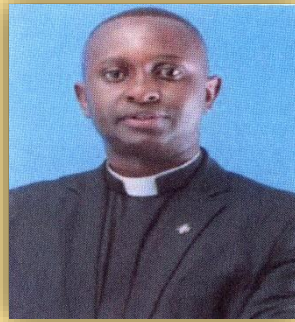




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MY EXPERIENCE AS SCHOOL CHAPLAIN



Fr Noel Salekwa, CSSp.

From the time I received my appointment letter after my priestly ordination to the day I reported to my place of ministry on 15 September 2020, I was a bit scared. However, I saw this as an exciting moment in my life. I was scared because of the new task of pioneering the Mission and Identity office of the Congregation at Tengeru Schools (Tengeru Boys Secondary School and Holy Ghost Viziwi (Deaf) High School as Chaplain. Well, I have to admit, I was not fully aware of what this new office entailed, despite this ministry being already present at our two schools, namely, Libermann Schools and Marian Schools. Nevertheless, I remained excited at *paratus ad omnia* (I was ready for anything). I recall walking in the Tessier House (Community house) and being welcomed by two smiling confreres; Fr. John Assey and Fr. Emmanuel Kway). Later I found out that a special dinner had been prepared, some confreres together with some sisters of Filles des Marie du Saint Denis, and teachers from the school had been invited for this occasion. It was at this moment, that I set aside my fears and apprehensions and decided that this is going to be one of the greatest experiences of my religious life.

The following morning after the celebration of the Eucharist, Fr Assey introduced me to the school community. This was followed by a tour of the school that included various academic departments and the schools' self-reliant projects. Finally, he showed me the office and I still recall his words, "behold your office padre and do the necessary to the best of your ability". Since the chaplaincy office was new, I had to prepare a *vade mecum*, which actually helped me to organise the day-to-day activities and the annual programme. Indeed, this was how the office of chaplaincy took off, I guess to a good start.

The Chaplaincy programme revolves around the seven Core Values of Spiritan Education namely, Openness to the Spirit, A sense of Community, Option for the Poor, Commitment to Service, Global Vision, High Educational Standards and Personal and Faith Development. At this point, I would like to thank the Provincial Administration for their dedication and devotion to this newly established office. I received some literature, which really helped me in my new ministry. I will forever remain grateful to them, as I owed my success to the Provincial Administration.

Availability is very central to Chaplaincy. I recall going to the office and students would come in and share their joys and sorrows of the day. At times, they would come and inquire if I had set aside time for

myself because they noticed that I was always there for them. This was indeed a good concern on their part, which I later appreciated.

Synodality is another aspect that is vital to this office. I knew I could not have handled all the business alone. With the permission of the Director, Fr Assey, we set up a Liturgical committee that consisted of two sisters, three teachers (one of them a catechist), seven students and myself. This committee had the role of facilitating every liturgical and para-liturgical activity in the school. Indeed, the sense of walking together was very much felt.

Inclusivity is another element that added spice to my ministry. As mentioned above, Tengeru School community has two schools. One is the Holy Ghost Viziwi (Deaf) High School, which is relatively new. The other one is Tengeru Boys Secondary School, which has been in existence for many years. Students from both schools live together and share the same learning environment despite following two different ways of teaching them. This living together has really brought a big change on the part of their hearing counterparts. The Deaf school has forty students from Form I to Form IV. They are amazing students. My office was just adjacent to their classes as we shared the same block. As time went on and as I settled down, I developed a certain affection for them. I found myself beginning to learn the sign language in order to communicate with them and be able to offer my chaplaincy services. Many could come for Spiritual direction and confession. At the heart of Tengeru schools, I see the future of Spiritan mission. *Bravo Padre John!* One of the good and beautiful outcomes of these students living in the same environment is that it has changed attitudes and reduced the stigma attached to students who are deaf or have a certain handicap. However, given the right resources and good learning environment, deaf students can just perform as the rest. In the end, it was difficult to distinguish those who are deaf from the hearing ones. One could see that the deaf students felt inclusive and valued as their counterparts also began to learn the sign language.

Participation is another dimension that built up my office. The staff and the non-teaching staff were part of the chaplaincy programme. We usually had morning prayers before commencing our responsibilities and to those celebrating birthdays and anniversaries, we offered Holy Mass for them. They joined the students in the liturgical and para liturgical activities. During the days of confession, they could come as well. I remember talking with three teachers who later became Lay Spiritan Associates. They always joined us for our Congregational celebrations and funerals. In this way, they were beginning to live and share our charism.

Lastly, **Protection of Minors and Vulnerable Adults** has made chaplaincy as an office where both students and staff feel safe. This has a great benefit to our Spiritan Identity. I would strongly recommend that all schools draw up policies on protection of minors and vulnerable adults and that such policies become part of life of all schools. This has worked quite well at Tengeru schools. Therefore, we cannot bury our heads in the sand when it comes to issues of this nature.

As I conclude, allow me to quote the words of Grainne Delaney who was Chaplain at Crescent College:

Chaplaincy matters, it is a privileged space..... the work of the school chaplain is to lead and facilitate opportunities for students (and of course the staff) to grow in relationship with God, self, others, and creation. It is also knowing, when a student comes to the door, to look calmly back at that student, put down the pen, close the laptop and be present to this privileged moment.¹

How I wish it were possible to express my feelings on just how much I am grateful and honoured to have been part of this apostolate. It is equally impossible to recreate or duplicate everything that I cherish and treasure about the said mission. I must admit that the missionary endeavour and experience that I had for these twenty months would not have been possible without God's unlimited grace. I wish to be grateful

¹ See Allain Hilliard, *Chaplains: Ministers of Hope*, Leeson Place, Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2021, 133.

to the unconditional support that I received from the Provincial Administration and my confreres, especially Frs John Assey. and Emmanuel Kway. My thanks also go to the teaching and non-teaching staff, school Board, parents and students. I am eternally grateful!

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