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MY MISSIONARY JOURNEY IN FRANCE!

Before France

My missionary journey began way back at Wenje parish in Garissa diocese, Kenya. One could have traced it much earlier. However, I have decided to begin it just at the end of my fourth year of theology at Tangaza college. What I lived at Wenje was so different from my privileged background in Rombo in a catholic majority village and a relatively good weather that allowed us to grow a variety of crops. At Wenje, the only arable land was few metres from the banks of Tana River with the risky of floods every season. The weather was humid, dry, with neither all-weather roads, electricity, mobile telephone nor tap water. All these were luxuries of city life in Nairobi. The Wenje experience lasted for only one year of Pastoral Experience Programme (PEP), as we used to call it! Had I made this experience before writing my letter for Mission Appointment, I would have remained in Kenya probably at Wenje.

At Wenje, from 2008-2009, I had this extraordinary experience with two Kenyan confreres, Frs Daniel Waweru and Peter Ndegwa. This was the time I moved from big Spiritan formation communities to a small community. It was a good experience in itself as I had to negotiate between the ideal and the concrete life. I tried to make the best out of it! I had a good contact with the local community regardless of their religious affiliation or social status. I learned to work not only for sacramental needs but also socio-economic needs of the population. I also learnt that in mission, the work of each confrere is complementary and never in competition. The one who goes to the sick person is attending to the same body of Christ as the one who goes to distribute goats to village members who don't come to our Sunday masses. Moreover, the success of our mission depends on the collective witness from each confrere. I had an opportunity to accompany youths and altar servants, taking communion to the sick, leading celebration of the Word of God on Sundays and working as Project assistant in a restocking programme. I thank those confreres and people of Wenje and our Muslim brethren of Somali origin whom we shared a lot. I will always treasure this life changing experience in Wenje where I experienced the generosity and the simplicity of the people.

The French experience

My one-year experience came to an end with priestly ordination and the sending on mission to France. It was in my intentions to live a different Spiritan experience in a francophone country. By then I had applied for France, Senegal and Guadeloupe. My formators by then were not very much in favour of the latter as they said there were no Tanzanians there. I was not looking for a mission where there were Tanzanians anyway! A new journey began on August 5, 2008. I left Tanzania in a Qatar Airway plane for Paris, in such a new and strange environment. It was a flight full of surprises. I travelled in business class, for the



reasons that I do not know to date. At Doha, I had access to a Business lounge with all services that go with it. All these were new to me; I didn't know what to do exactly as it was my maiden flight out of the continent. I was wondering how could they serve us with alcoholic drinks both in the plane and at Doha airport in an Islamic country where alcohol is forbidden, *haram* !

The next day, I arrived in Paris welcomed by the Provincial at the airport and Kenyan scholastic, Steven Okuku, who left us some years later. It was a beginning of a new adventure. This time, I was in a new country, a new culture, a new language, a new way of doing and seeing the world. Anyway, this is what I wanted to live, being Spiritan in a context different from our Anglophone world. I was immediately admitted to a summer French course for one month at the Catholic institute of Paris before joining my new community at Lille where I was to do a one academic year at the public university learning French as a foreign language. Things moved very fast, after a year of community life and language course, in September 2009, I was missioned to a parish in the suburbs of Paris, diocese of St Denis in France.

At Blanc Mesnil, the journey will last for good 7 years. It was a time of continued culture and language learning as well as pastoral ministry. I kept on being inquisitive, asking questions and looking for my own answers to what I was facing or living. We were in a community of 5 or 4 confreres serving six parishes in four different towns in a multicultural and multireligious context without mentioning the socio-economic difficulties that faced the habitants of that region. We were confronted with a poor population mostly immigrants from all corners of the world. We had a lot of people frequenting our churches – children, youth and adults. With time I got more invested in catechesis and youth ministry. I regret not to have opted for youth ministry at Tangaza by then. However, I learnt to work with others, who had other competences. In the last years, I was also involved in catechumenal preparation of adults. For those seven years, I met thousands of people both Christians and non-Christians. My work was somehow easy as the context had similarities with my Wenje experience. Seine Saint Denis neighbourhood is known to be the poorest in France and with high concentration of Muslim community. Other religions are also present. I had to refer to my formation in Tangaza and dialogue with Islam in Wenje and Tanzania so as to find an equilibrium in a world where everything can turn into polemics! Despite the best years on parish ministry, I had to leave Blanc Mesnil in September 2017 for a new mission as I needed to take on new challenges.

From September 2017 to August 2020, I was a full-time student at the public University of Strasbourg for a Postgraduate diploma in Sciences of education and Master's degree in Education. Three intensive years of academic life in view of working in education and training institutions for disadvantaged youths in France and in Africa in the future. This was the intention expressed by the French province when I went to school.

On the 1st of September 2020, I was appointed to a new community in Paris as a Regional Chaplain in one of the six regions of Auteuil Foundation. This is a new adventure in a highly professional world. Auteuil Foundation is a Catholic Foundation belonging to the Archdiocese of Paris that takes care of youth and families from difficult situations, who need protection, education, training and integration. Spiritans involvement in this ministry began with Daniel Brottier and his confreres and has evolved over years. Today we, Spiritans, are there to accompany youth and adults in their way of life as well as making sure that the Foundation remains inspired by Gospel values. This new adventure is a good laboratory of a synodal Church! Spiritans as clergy are no longer at the level of direction, they have to accept a humbler place where they are no longer on top of the hierarchy. The Congregation still has a full time presence in the governance of the Auteuil Foundation. We learn to accompany and not direct, to work with others and not to decide all by oneself. This accompaniment was already at work in parish work as the priest cannot do everything and has not all the competences. Personally, I have been at easy with this way of doing



mission that we could call mission as collaboration with lay people where each one has his/her just place. The 1998 Maynooth General Chapter calls this “collaborative ministry.

What has kept me moving as a Spiritan? Firstly, the trust that others have put on me. In all my communities, I met confreres who trusted me and gave me responsibilities to an extent that some became a bit jealous. It is out of that trust that I have served as community bursar for many years now even though I am not excellent in book keeping. It is the same trust that saw me to the Provincial council as a councillor from 2012 to 2017 under Gilles Pages and Marc Botzung. I had a wonderful experience that exposed me to the reality of the French province with its strengths and weaknesses. I had my place and I felt that I was listened to and I wasn't there just to maintain the status quo. We debated together and when decisions were taken, we assumed them together. This was our force!

Secondly, it is the Tanzanian fellowship that we have tried to nurture in France and beyond our borders. When I arrived, I was welcomed by elder brothers who were working or studying. Their brotherly support was crucial in my integration to that new world. Over years, we have tried to build it, a kind of fellowship that considers the other as a confrere, a brother to love despite his status of being finally professed or not, ordained or lay. This way of treating confreres has made us one despite our different personalities and philosophies of life. Our union is our force as we try to witness, to live a Spiritan life in a certain way that distinguishes us from other confreres from other parts of the African continent. This legacy though fragile needs to be taken care of daily.

What I appreciate in our way of living mission is the community aspect of our lives. At the beginning of lockdown, I experimented one week of loneliness during my field work. It was clear that I was not made to live alone even though I am not the one to make jokes in community or talk a lot at table, community life was an important structure in living my Spiritan mission. It gives a space to share both joys and pains, successes and failures in mission. While in community, I can dedicate my time to pastoral while others take care of my well-being, of material needs, etc. I have learned also the importance of our common ownership of things like vehicles and other equipment which require important investment. Putting together our financial resources allows us to have a common health insurance, pension scheme, pocket money, or leave allowance. This liberates individuals from material preoccupation. However, since we are required by government to have certified accounts, even though not fully certified, it imposes the duty to justify for any expenses be personal or community money. Definitely, it is strange to the old way of doing things but financial transparency and accountability are becoming inevitable values in our secular world too.

Perspectives

In my attempt to come to the aid of our youths in Tanzania, with some young people, in February 2021, I created an association registered in France called “Educ-Forma Tanzanie.” Under French law it seeks to give access to education, health service, professional training and integration through work. It is still in its infant stage though we are already accompanying more than thirty youths by paying part of their school or college fees or paying for a health insurance. Our dream is to help more young people to get opportunities to have access to quality education, training and health care. Our operations depend a lot on confreres on the ground who can identify needy situations. These confreres sometimes do participate themselves as we seek to mobilize families, friends and other stakeholders in taking care of educational, training, integration and health needs.

Auteuil Foundation works outside French territories with partners that are engaged in ministry for the youth. Tanzania as a Province can benefit from this expertise in terms of management, training of

professionals, and many other areas of cooperation. I know that there are more links with French speaking countries but language should not be a barrier. There are new links that can be created. We have started slowly with one institution. We will need to exploit other possibilities especially at this time in history where Auteuil Foundation is ready to train Spiritans in areas related to education.

I am more convinced that there is a need to strengthen our Spiritan communities and structure them so that they become a place where each confrere finds peace and joy in accomplishing his ministry to the poor. Over these fourteen years, I am more convinced that our success depends not on our own efforts but from the One who makes it possible for us through his grace. For that reason, no one can be proud of himself since all is grace!!! May the Lord continue to guide us all!

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