

A Prayer Answered

I had asked for years to be assigned to work in a Marist mission, but was never allowed to do so. I recall the last time. When I had just completed my degree at Catholic University in 1943, I again asked Bro. Louis Omer about going to the missions. He told me quite bluntly in his own genuine style, "You have a mission waiting for you right here at Marist College, do it!" That was that!

That had brought me to Poughkeepsie for fifteen years here at the college that occupied all of my time. Then in 1958 when I had been selected to represent the United States Marists at our General Chapter, I was assigned as the Assistant General for the United States and its mission, the Province of the Philippines; and I was then also asked to replace Bro. Jean Emile who had been the Assistant General for the Province of China in Asia along with its mission, the Province of Sri Lanka. This meant that I would have to cover America and its mission as well as all of Asia. Besides that, the newly founded Mission Commission asked me to visit our Marists in fifteen countries of Africa. This had been a good way to channel my enthusiasm and to keep me fully occupied.

They were fascinating and profitable years. Now, at last, I had hope of being assigned to actually work and serve in the mission in Liberia. I was thrilled, and naturally much better prepared. The sendoff for this mission was to take place at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York with a Mass and the official sendoff of the Cardinal Archbishop. A crowd of Marists and relatives attended the Mass, and we even had a small group of Japanese from our Japan Mission who also attended.

It was a grand affair, but I was not yet in a mission of my dreams. This was to be the start of a new way of life. I could not thank the Lord enough for His many blessings.

It was in October 1986 that I took off for my new mission in Liberia to join our own Marists of the Esopus Province. Our Marists in Pleebo in the Diocese of Cape Palmas ran an elementary school and a high school as well. As we all know, these were the children of the descendants of so many who had been brought to America as slaves and later freed. The whole country had been often helped by the U.S. government to manage its growth. This accounted for the fact that so many of the families had assigned to their children the names of many of the famous men in America, and it was not strange to be using many important historical names of Americans who had impressed this mission country.

I had been assigned to help in this country. My work was essentially as the bursar of the Diocese. I lived alone with the Bishop in his big house and would receive the monthly funds needed for the operating of the activities of the Diocese. The funds came from the SMA Fathers in New Jersey who had been assigned this task.

I lived with the Bishop and attended to his needs during the week and on Friday noon I would take off for our mission in Pleebo, some fifteen miles away, and I then would live and work with our Brothers and return to the Bishop's work on Sunday night.

This enabled me to be of help to the Diocese and also to keep in touch with our Brothers and to be involved in their apostolic work as well. In this way I was able to help some of our students with problems, and it gave me occasion for some spiritual direction for these young Africans.

After the daily Mass and prayers I attended to my own personal traditional devotions, and I was impressed with the private Mass of the Bishop. I used to also have the occasion of bringing the Blessed Sacrament to some of those who asked for it as the Bishop was short of priests and did not even have enough to cover the Masses in the eight parishes that he had. Some of the Fathers had to say two Masses and then go to their mission church on Sundays. When our pastor in Pleebo had to go to the mission church, he often confided the religious service of the Sunday Mass to the care of the Brothers.

Several of our Brothers who were willing to do so officiated on Sundays when the pastor was away. This Brother presided at the procession and all the prayers of the Mass except the consecration, and he would also give the homily. This made absolutely no difference to the people, and made it possible to have Sunday Mass.

The Brothers were good disciplinarians, and the pastor could get away at times leaving one of the Brothers to help out if needed. I had seen this same practice in one of my mission tours of Africa and was pleased to see that for Sunday Mass a church of ours in the bush was provided the Mass and Communion as well as a homily by some trained respected elders of the parish. It was great when the Brothers could be of service and provide an example as well of dedicated service to the Church. The mission work to be done for the Diocese was not very demanding, and I must say that the Bishop would listen to our suggestions, readily agreeing if he felt they were right.

I had been blessed in receiving a Jeep that would make it possible for me to travel to Monrovia and also to the nearby country of Ivory Coast. Our cook, Albert, could manage to get to the fishermen early in the morning to provide us with excellent fresh fish. We were able to get some things nearby, but the variety was simple, and that was why I used to make a trip monthly to the Ivory Coast to get more variety for our diet and also some few special things so that we could celebrate at our monthly gathering. For our monthly gathering we would get some extra help for our cook and someone prepared the program for singing or special speeches to praise any extra achievements we wanted to praise from the past month. Many of the religious with us admitted that this monthly get-together meant very much to them. Often the pastor was away on tour to collect funds, but we always tried to be faithful to the monthly get-together. To this day when I hear from any of them, they love to recall the parties that we held. Then again once in a while it was our turn to invite the various Bishops and pastors of the whole country for a weekend meeting.

There were also many meetings to be provided for, and often they were scheduled to be at our place. The Bishop was short of priests for some of his churches, and would have appreciated help if any of the Brothers were interested in that vocation, but we were all Marist first and missionaries second. I looked forward to the meeting on Fridays and weekends because they provided more interesting work and community exchanges of missionaries. We often took off for a swim or to explore something new in the area.

As I stated above, the monthly parties became a much-loved gathering and were necessary and helped to contribute to the solid get-together that it provided. I would go off by Jeep the week before to assure that we had everything that we needed. Such parties could never have occurred if we did not have the blessing of the Jeep to make those trips. At this point I wish to pay tribute to those who provided the Jeep. It was Jack Gartland, a sturdy friend and local benefactor at the college who sent the Jeep. Jack told me that he would give the money for the Jeep to the college and that the college would thus become the donor officially. But it was from Jack's heart that the Jeep came. And while I am writing about Jack Gartland, I must also stress that we always had a much better monthly party when we received a package of goodies from his wife, Catherine. She had a special knack of knowing just what might be needed over and above the goodies. There was always a problem with the mail for it was slow to get to us, but we never minded if the Christmas materials came for Easter or any other date, for the Gartland packages were always welcomed. I guess I can say that I have always been solicitous and concerned for the missions, but I can assure you that after having been in a mission myself I now more so appreciate the kind concern and consideration for the missions.

I should say more about the various trips to Ivory Coast or to Ghana where we have English-speaking training houses for our Ghanaian candidates. Because of the troubles that were recurring often enough between the various countries, there was an oversensitivity about security on long rides. I recall that on the first monthly trip from Pleebo to Tabou in Ivory Coast I was stopped thirty-two times on my way there, just to assure security. I soon learned that the solution was to ask the Cardinal Archbishop of Abidjan for a letter explaining whom I was working for, and then there would be no more trouble. On the next trip I showed the letter, and the soldiers on duty said, "OK, Father, but the next time you come please bring us a rosary or even some medals." And that is what I did on the next trip. I never again had any trouble except for another occasion much later when I could have been in very serious trouble, even dead, if the Lord had not been with me.

On this occasion I was returning from my monthly trip and had gifts for the clergy and religious who would be celebrating this coming Christmas. I left Tabou, crossed the river by boat as usual, and came to a security stop in Cape Palmas where I was well-known in our own country. There were three soldiers with guns as usual. But with them this time was a man who acted as if he was in charge.

I had never been stopped in Cape Palmas, and everyone knew I was working for the Bishop. But this man did not know me, and when I came out of the car, he yelled to take everything out of the Jeep. I mentioned that this was my usual monthly trip for the Bishop and clergy and religious. He shouted, "Take everything out!"

I do not know what possessed me, but I explained that this was my regular monthly trip for food. He shouted again to take everything out. Then, I lost my cool and said, "Sir, I have been doing this every month for over a year. I surely will take everything out of the Jeep if you insist. But you know that I represent the Church and I am dressed accordingly. I have never seen you and you have no uniform or indication that you have the right to stop me. I respect authority but I cannot see by what authority you stop me for you have nothing to show that authority. Still, I will take things out just the same."

There were three men with guns and one whispered to me to be careful for he was dangerous. The Boss Man looked at me and pointed to the Jeep screaming, "Go!" I then answered thank you and left. The next day one of the three soldiers told me that I could have been killed, for he was one of the worst officers in the country and had killed many people. Thanks be to God that my Boss had more authority. But I realized what might have happened and thanked the Lord for His protection.

The Lord knew me better than I knew myself, for it was shortly after the above incident that I had my fourth attack of malaria. When I went to check with the doctor, he was the one to advise me to return to America where I could be treated. I had had malaria four times, and it was safe to assume that I would never be cured here. I knew that my mission service would be coming to a close after only four years.

The Superiors recalled me to the United States, and I began to plan my return. I had come and had served, and now I was to return after only four years of service. I wondered how it would be to return to the college and knew it was the wise procedure to follow. The invitation to return to the college was received, and the Provincial admitted that this was no doubt the best decision to follow. I left whatever I did not need with the mission and returned not knowing how quickly the Lord would give me His sign of approval.

It was around graduation time and I was invited to please take part in the procession and to offer the opening prayer. I was unable to walk in the procession, as I was still too weak. Shaileen Kopec was assigned to look after me. The graduation that year would be on the grounds north of the Lowell Thomas building. I was dressed in my white cassock, fresh from Liberia, and waited for the procession to move on while I remained seated at my place on the dais. When all were seated I proceeded to the loudspeaker, gave the blessing, and returned to my seat, asking Shaileen to accompany me to the Gatehouse. I was pleased the next day to hear that some of the people in the front rows had been pleasantly surprised to know that Father Champagnat had been able to make the ceremony, at least for the prayer!

Here again I have proof positive that the Lord has been looking after me all these years. I had received my wish of active service in the missions, so I offered my service to our Poughkeepsie Province to continue to work for the missions as long as I could, and to try to be helpful during my stay at the college. I went from my mission love to my natural love here at the college. After ten years more of mission work back home, I asked the Provincial to be released, and to continue to do what I can for the college as long as God allows. One of our saintly Brothers here early in my training years had suggested a motto that I did cherish and have tried to live by. It is so meaningful to me now at 85 that I never hesitate to pass it on when I can. It applies to everyone. "Live prepared to die!" I left the missions with that motto in mind, and it has kept me going every since.