



Society of African Missions

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Confinement on the Hills of Bomi

By Rev. Firmin Konan Kouassi

On the hills of Bomi stands an old town Tubmanburg, on which the effects of the past civil and the Ebola crisis remain vivid. They make it appear like a forgotten city from afar. But summoning the courage to climb the hills and move around, some new buildings suggest hope which the warm smiles of the people would soon confirm. And like any new encounter, the hills and the inhabitants will remind you of something of your past.

Walking on those red roads I think about Daloa the city where I was born in Ivory Coast (Côte d'Ivoire). And I see myself walking to school climbing hills, and admiring forests and farm lands, that cocoa and coffee farms had quickly eaten. I would have loved to never have grown enough so not to leave them. However the wheel of life imposes some new loves. The Saturdays and Sundays gathering with friends and family at the Church opened a thirst; another hill to climb, the hill of the Church. The hill of the Church brought many joys and seemed

incomparable. It called always for more, accompanied of its inevitable companions of setbacks and doubts. Finally in 2004, I jumped into the void with the SMA. A beautiful roller coaster that ended in 2013 with my priestly ordination. And passing through the same roads, I once cross with my roller coaster, I remember that It has already been 7 years since



my return to the country, and I still smell this mixed feeling of emotions in a frightening game. In March this year, the echo of the world hit by the Covid19, reached our hills. It sounded rather distant while everywhere mounted the threat of its stink. A throwback of the Ebola crisis seemed to have resurfaced. The monotony which it had broken, was once again longed for, replaced by another kind of silence fueled by hopelessness.

They said “The virus could be anywhere and everywhere soon and Africa would be completely swept away”. With the poor medical facilities of the continent, there seemed to be no doubt. All was to be closed down.

An emergency meeting was held by the Archbishop of Monrovia with the health secretariat. Some public health experts gave some ideas about the virus and some protocols were to be followed:

- Wear a mask
- Keep a safe distance
- Washing of hands
- No more public Mass or gatherings
- Stay at home and stay safe.

The verdict was harsh and some pastors made the remark: “How can we close the churches when people are in need of comfort?” This situation might be a test from God.

We have to be with the people. Unfortunately, the decision was beyond the Church. The State had to protect its citizens. The logic of pastoral care to the sick could not even reverse the decision, learning that we were facing a pandemic disease. The pastoral could even lead to a more deadly outcome.

Confinement on the Hills of Bomi (Cont.)

Back on my hills, we closed the church and our team of 3 priests followed the recommendations of the civil and religious authorities. We had a private Mass and stopped all visitations and activities involving the parishioners. It begun the famous word of this year: confinement.

It seemed first that all hopes were dead to reach out to the people. Then, we remember the power of the medias. I stated some prayers everyday on Facebook which was so much flooded with all sorts of messages and prayers broadcasted here and there around the world.

I soon realised that people needed maybe more entertainment in order to pass the day and relieve the stress. I went back to my dear hobby: writing poetry and making a video on the internet. Thus, I portrayed the apprehensions and stresses of the moments in some words like:

The baths of salvation

*Some hands to wash,
What a beautiful task!*

A bucket, a tap,

*Some water, some soap and the game
is done.*

Everywhere in the compound,

At every corner,

The streets and the tours,

Buckets are raised everywhere.

What if hands are not enough?

For no one to perish,

We might maybe consider,

Also cleaning the hearts.



Surely, we need to wash more than our hands. The soul of the world needs to be washed.

While seeking for the world to be washed, I found the time to revisit some other poems I have been writing some time ago; I edited them and published them on amazon: **Passions et Lumières (Ben Léo Moiyé)**. They remind us how much only God can relieve us from pain and make us still appreciate the life he has given to us.

In the month of July, the tension in the country slowly went down. The curfew which ran from 3pm to 6am was removed. The quarantine and restrictions of movement between Counties were lifted. The public celebrations were resumed with 25 to 50 people wearing masks, allowed in gatherings. We could meet with parishioners in the town and visit outstations anew.

We are moving slowly towards the end of the year, we hear the cry of the people around the world suffering from the Covid 19. Here things are confusing because no updates are made. The last report shows 1,461 cases and 82 deaths. All we are left to say is the Corona did not sweep away our Country nor our County. Our hills are still standing. Though, we pray for a vaccine to be found.

I am standing in the catholic school at the edge of our Parish, as I write this note. I look at our small St. Luke clinic, then I gaze at the horizon. The silence and the monotony are returning. I will love to find some joy in them; that is certainly a better fuel to climb our hills.

Expressions of Faith during the year 2020

By Fr. James McConnell, SMA

In my youthful years, several friends told me the life of a missionary did not make sense. They laughed at my choice to join SMA (Society of African Missions).

From day one my life began to experience a crisis and the opportunity for new ministries. I served in Liberia, West Africa, Andros Islands in the Bahamas and thirty years as priest in Newark, New Jersey.

Growing older has taught me that we all have power to do good. We just have to make sure that we use it. Reflecting on Hebrews 11:1 where an insight influenced me "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen".

Aging is like being born. It happens one day at a time. Of course I mourn my youth, but realize that like a caterpillar just when life seems to end, it becomes a butterfly and begins a new journey.

Looking back to Africa, one of my ministries was to reach out to lepers which parallels with stateside ministry to AIDS patients.

Fear became strength, learning a new language and living among “strangers”, absorbing different cultures enabled me to have new ministries in the Bahamas.

Both experiences gave me positive feelings for the extended family.

My many years in the USA developed into listening skills and opened new ministries facing prejudices and the ability to turn negativity into something positive.

What many say can't be achieved because of prejudices— can be a blessing because God gives each of us power to overcome anything that would destroy our spirit. We discover our purpose to be here— embrace the gift of God's spirit and witness to the world.

I wake up every morning with the gift of life still within me. Another opportunity to do all that I was created for.

Thank God for being with me and showing me the way to abundant life.



Rain does not fall on one roof alone

By Rev. Guolitiri Abraham

I am Guolitiri Abraham. A Ghanaian by nationality. My strong feeling and desire to be a missionary got me started my seminary formation with the SMA in 2012. I spend a year in Cape Coast (Ghana) to do my preparatory program. I had my philosophical studies in St Paul's Catholic Seminary in Accra, Ghana, for two years. In 2015/2016, I had my international spiritual year formation in Calavi (Benin). It is an important part of the missionary formation of the SMA Fathers. In 2017/2018 I had my pastoral year in Egypt. Since 2018 till date, I have been in Ivory Coast in our house of formation, Foyer Père Meraud, for my



last cycle of initial formation in Theology. I am in my fourth year of theology and was ordained a deacon on the 4 July 2020. I wish to share with you my experience of this pandemic.

For some time now the COVID -19 has impacted our lives as we never would have imagined or believed. This pandemic exempted no one in this world. In a similar way our house of formation “Foyer SMA Pere Meraud” in Abidjan, Ivory Coast was not equally exempted from this terrible and frightening pandemic. As an African proverb says, **“rain does not fall on one roof alone.”** For each one of us worldwide, our daily lives or routine were transformed from one way to another that we never would have envisaged. We all had to suddenly change our attitudes just to protect our health and that of our neighbors. Over the space of a mere week, I recall how a great panic caught up with everyone in the country and in our house of formation.

The pandemic of COVID -19 in Ivory Coast was identified since the 11 March 2020 when the first case was detected in the country. The Bishops of Ivory Coast adopted a series of measures to be applied to different activities of the Church to adapt to the provisions adopted by the government to combat the spread of the Coronavirus. This went a long way to affect all our activities such as pastorals in the parishes, our physical presence in the Institute where we study theology, ICMA.

ICMA is the Catholic Missionary Institute of Abidjan founded by different missionary congregations for the theological and missionary formation of their Seminarians. The quick response of the government and the church can be described in an African proverb which says that even the lion, the king of the forest, protects itself against flies. Thus, we who are men of faith had to show our faith through reasonable works.

This pandemic brought to us all great uncertainty and worry, and we had to be committed to taking wise sanitary measures while not succumbing to unfounded fear. These measures helped us as much as possible to minimize the risks for our community. There was confinement for everyone, our external commitments were interrupted, the house of formation was closed to all friends and neighbors who use to come and pray with us and also parish groups that spent their days of retreat and recollection. Also, our personnel, the cooks, the cleaners and gardeners were all stopped from coming to work.

Things seem great when you are in control. When a wrench is thrown in, you need to learn to be more flexible and open. And this happened to the sort of thirty-seven (37) men of twelve (12) different nationalities in our house of formation. The strong collective resilience that we all showed up to keep life bearable in assuming different responsibilities of the house is highly remarkable. Indeed, just as the chameleon changes color to match the earth, the earth does not change colors to match the chameleon, we had to change immediately our way of living to survive. This period really made us “live as a family in a spirit of shared responsibility.” We did the cooking, cleaning our environment, taking care of our animals such as rabbits, pigs, chickens and ourselves.

Also living as an apostolic community, we came together to share our faith and love. “After the example of the first Christian community, we still came together to meditate the Word of God and share it, to celebrate the Eucharist and the prayer of the Divine Office.” We were able to live the holy week. Thus, we had access to the Sacraments, which a lot of people could not, due to the restrictions that were given by the government and the Church. We also prayed and celebrated all the activities of the holy week and Easter. So, all this reminds me Pope Saint John Paul II who said in his book *Crossing the threshold of hope* that the power of the Cross and the Resurrection is greater than any evil which man could or should fear. There were great uncertainties as to whether the annual priestly and deaconate ordinations that take place in June would really be realized with all the restrictions and sanitary measures. Finally, the realization of this ordination of 19 priest and 11 deacons of 4 different congregations organized by the SMA on the 4th July, 2020 made me to confess with saint Luke the evangelist that “what is impossible for men is possible for God” (Lk 18:27).

Despite the restrictions, our Institute of study, ICMA continued our formation virtually particularly through zoom conferences. We found that zoom teaching was physically and mentally exhausting, and we tried extra hard to keep up and cope. We missed the regular informal contact with colleagues of other congregations in the corridors and common rooms at ICMA, as well as the pleasure of the classroom with interaction amongst us students and professors. The academic year ended much differently than any of us expected. We missed the celebrations and gatherings that bind our community and other communities together at the Institute. Even though we grieve the disruptions, disappointments, and pain that this health crisis has unleashed, we claim the gospel hope that Christ is always reforming our lives, our Institute, and our world, even and especially through this challenging time. We are tremendously grateful for the resiliency and faithfulness of our entire community in this season. The quick and creative works of students and the Formation Team have ensured the continuity of our academic program and, most importantly, the enduring connection of our community, even as we had been physically distant.

This confinement was not an imprisonment. Thankfully, we have experienced good fraternity. We supported one another mutually. We were blessed that the house has big enough grounds for us to exercise and have recreations. We had regularly in the evenings sporting activities which included soccer, basketball, and table tennis. This helped us to be fit and balanced physically and psychologically even though we had not been outside of our house for about three months. This condition of living had really been very formative in teaching us how to surrender. We got used to surrendering to the fact that things may not look like what we would always want them to look like or what we expect them to look like.

With this pandemic, we believe that despite all the uncertainty and difficulties of our present time, God, in some way, can lead us throughout. And the Lord is working almost imperceptibly in our hearts to facilitate a more ardent love and desire for him. As we find refuge under the caring, loving wings of God we discover that this perfect love casts out all our fear.

