

# MINE WAS A JOURNEY

***September 2011 - July 2017***

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**MINE WAS A JOURNEY.** Clearly, "the time has come for me to be gone" (2Tim 4:6), back to my home diocese of Bamenda, Cameroon. As I pack my books and bags, ready to depart, thoughts are running through my mind. How can I sum up my stay in the *white man country*? Only one expression comes to mind: ***mine was a journey.***

**A WARM AND WELCOMING PEOPLE.** Mine was a journey with a caring people, a warm and welcoming people, a loving and lively people, an accepting and humble people. Such were the people with whom I lived in Portsmouth for six years as a gift of faith. Mine was an experience of a people who were living the following words of Paul: "*Do not let your love be a pretence, but sincerely prefer good to evil. Love each other as much as brothers should, and have a profound respect for each other (Romans 12:14-21).*" And that was not all.

**A FORGIVING PEOPLE.** Yes, mine was a journey with a persevering people, a forgiving and forbearing people, a patient and tolerant people. They knew, as Pope Francis had said, that "a little bit of mercy makes the world less cold and more just."<sup>1</sup> Just as they were welcoming and forgiving, they were generous as well.

**A GENEROUS PEOPLE.** Yes, mine was a journey with a people firm in faith, happy in hope, constant in charity, never tired of giving, doing, reaching out, to the point of giving their very lives. *If you need anything, shout. Is there any way I can help?* Just like the people of Macedonia and Achaia sent money to help the poor in Jerusalem (Romans 15:26), the people of Tilehurst and Woodley also helped the poor "with temporal possessions" (Romans 15:27) within the country and abroad.

**SAMENESS AND DIFFERENCE.** Yet, mine was a journey, with a people like all others; feeble and fragile, fallible and failing, weak and weary; always ready to do better, get better, and to rise and move forward, despite everything. It was fascinating to realise that the church in Portsmouth is strong, very strong, just like that in Bamenda. It is planted and grows on the faith of poor, simple people for whom the church means everything, because, for them, Christ means everything. Only then was it clear to me that things have not changed from how they were at the time of our Lord. For, it was the poor widow who readily gave her mite, "all she had to live on", (Mark 12:44), and Jesus praised her total surrender to Providence. But how did I find myself on mission?

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Kettle-Williams, J., ed., (2017), *Portsmouth People*, p. 7.

**THE GENESIS.** Mine was a journey which began on that night of Sunday, 25th September 2011 when, amidst tears and the pain of separation, I waved to my beloved ones and my beloved country from Douala International Airport, and boarded the flight to this mission land: Tilehurst, Woodley, Portsmouth, England. At Heathrow International Airport, two eager, enthusiastic and cheerful people were ready and willing to pick me up: Harry McSolely and Carmen Ibanez. That same evening, 26th September, there was a gathering in St. Joseph's presbytery, Tilehurst, where I was greeted and made welcome. Even though they all disappeared and I had to spend the very first night alone, I did what the agama lizard does very often. I went to the mirror, looked at the man in the mirror, and he looked at me. I smiled at him and he smiled back at me. Then I spoke to him.

*Bonaventure, welcome to Mission Land! This is what it means! They are all gone. Your first night is alone. And, perhaps, that is how it will be most of the time. But, know that you are not alone. There are people around you, people ready to work with you, people ready to support you, which is why they have come and welcomed you. Then, I prayed and went to bed...Fr. John Nelson came the following day. He would be my parish priest, residing at English Martyrs.*

And then, as if St. Joseph's Parish was the woman that conceived me, I was barely nine months in that parish, ready to be born into my mission, into St. John Bosco Parish, Woodley. And so Tilehurst became the place where my umbilical cord was buried, my mission birthplace, and Woodley became my mission territory. And the nine months in Tilehurst did not seem small, for the bonding was quick and profound, and the ties have remained strong ever since. But how did I feel when I set sail to start this mission?

**Mixed Emotions.** Mine was a journey undertaken with mixed emotions: zeal and anxiety, joy and sorrow, strength and weakness; feeling strong yet feeble; zealous yet timid; eager to take initiative but also quick to withdraw at the slightest danger, doubt or opposition. And the fluctuating feelings were real.

Mine was a journey that sometimes met with low moments; moments that saw tears flow, and, when I remembered the newspaper headline I had read many years ago: **Real men can cry**, I felt within: **Well done, boy! You are a real man!** At such moments, I needed lifting up, and there were some of my flock to lift me up. In one of such moments I felt a greater need for the protection and soothing of a mother, and turned to Our Mother Mary: the Ark of the Covenant.

Yes, mine was a journey that at times met with low moments for some of my flock too; moments when some of them were at the depths of their pain and distress; moments when some felt God was wicked, or did not exist, or did not care... And they were ready and happy to share their brokenness with me for no other reason than that I was a wounded healer; a pilgrim like them, with them, on the way to Paradise. But sometimes, sadly, the low moments were the work of an evil trinity: **misunderstanding, misinterpretation and misrepresentation.** Yes, I believe that a lot of hurt comes from

these three. The way to kill this devil I have found is always to **check it out. Check it out. Check it out!** The evil trinity often thrives because, as Bernard Shaw once put it, "the single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place."<sup>2</sup>

Mine was a journey undertaken as a neophyte, ready to learn and be led, to err and be corrected, to discover new ways, new meanings, new insights, and new things. And I did, indeed, err, and learn, and discover, so many times, to my deepest delight and gratitude. Mine was a journey with a mature congregation, full of talent, full of brains, full of hands, and feet, and eyes, and many other parts that were ready to be used by Our Lord for the building of His Kingdom within the Church and outside. My mission in Portsmouth reconnected me with the classroom.

**EDUCATION:** Mine was a journey that took me to the classroom again. It enabled me to come to an understanding of the Catechism of the Catholic Church in ways I had never before had. It opened my mind into the depths of Scriptures and their interpretation beyond anything I had ever done in my seminary days. It brought a lot of brightness and clarity to my preaching. Looking back to the nineteen years of my ministry, I realised how some of my sermons in earlier years were full of intellectual power with very little spiritual depth; how some were in the form of academic lectures rather than nourishment for the people. Enrolling in Maryvale Institute compelled me to open books and read. By so doing, the gift of writing which had been underdeveloped in me began to blossom. I was able to do a few publications as a result. But there was more.

Serving as chaplain and foundation Governor in St. Dominic Saviour Catholic Primary School, Woodley and St. Joseph's Catholic College, Reading, opened my eyes to the English educational system as well as its challenges. It was at Blessed Hugh Farringdon that a pretty teenage girl of about 17 came and said to me: "*I am a Muslim, but would love you to hear my confession, Father!*" That put me to shame when I thought how many Catholics don't value this Sacrament and how often I delay going for the Sacrament myself! Thus education was more than just academic.

Diocesan clergy meetings were really rich and friendly in atmosphere. There was always a specific topic, with an expert, who dealt with it in ways that engaged people. Such meetings had a prayer element fully into it. Adoration and midday prayer were a special feature of the meetings, which moved my heart deeply. The Bishop often attended, for he, too, is a priest, a member of the Presbyterium of the diocese. His presence, far from scaring priests, served as an example and inspiration to many and to me. But what really did I go to do in Portsmouth?

## **THE HEART OF THE MATTER**

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Kettle-Williams, J., ed., (2017), *Portsmouth People*, p. 7.

*'Do what the Archbishop has sent you to do. Announce the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the people,'* was my brother's wise advice as I left him at the Douala airport and this is what I set out to do.

St. Paul had warned the Christians of Rome to "avoid getting into debt, except the debt of mutual love" (Romans 13:8). The whole church in Bamenda and in Cameroon was in debt to all the missionaries who had gone out to Africa, risking their lives, to bring the Good news to the Dark Continent. My main task was to repair that debt, and to do so with joy and gratitude by preaching. I did not set out on a **begging mission**. Rather, mine was primarily a **thanking mission**. And, if through my expressions of gratitude, others responded with further gestures of generosity, which would only give room for further thanks.

### **BEYOND PORTSMOUTH**

Mine was a journey that took me beyond the boundaries of Portsmouth Diocese where I had gone to serve. For, I went to Lourdes, where Our Blessed Lady appeared to the little Bernadette and to Krakow, Poland, with over 100 young people and Bishop Philip. There, close to 3million young people from all over the world, gathered to celebrate their faith; and to Wembley Arena for Flame 2015 and 2017. Who says faith is dead in Europe? I met so many young people eager to preserve and deepen their faith. They were struggling, often against what I call the trappings.

### **TRAPPINGS OF WESTERN LIFE**

Mine was a journey into the jungle of western life, with all its trappings. I was not immune to these trappings and had to struggle just as much as those born and raised in that culture. Riches, wealth, plenty, pleasure, freedom, and individualism were obvious upon arrival. Smoking, binge drinking and drugs were real issues, and individuals, families and the government had good programmes in place to fight these. The genuine desire to fetch some money and help family and friends back home was not absent. The lure for riches, even for the holiest of intentions, can crack the holiest heart, tilting it in the direction it would rather not go. Standing up to trappings of whatever sort is a daily struggle. But what made me to stay focused on my mission and how did I get approach the work?

### **PILLARS OF PARISH LIFE**

The key to parish ministry was recognizing the pillars of parish life, trying to keep them solid and linked in to the central hub, that is, the parish office, with the parish administrator. Mine was a journey into a community that had solid pillars on which the parish stood firm, thrived and grew from strength to strength. It was often those pillars, more than myself, which made the parish tick. It would be completely false to consider that any particular initiative worked without the involvement of at least one of the pillars. Children's Liturgy, Readers Ministry, Music Ministry, Catechesis,

Communications Ministry, are just a few of the ministries that make up the pillars of parish life. Such pillars thrived with leaders who had personal passion, dedication and readiness to do whatever it took to see their ministry live, grow and flourish.

If I were to advise anyone preparing to go on a similar mission, I would say: ***Go with an open heart. The Lord will be leading you all the way. You will have your surprises; shocks as well. That's part of the deal! There are no ready-made solutions. The taste of the pudding lies in the eating.*** No amount of explanation would do the trick. You have to be in it to feel it; and to live it to know it! When you go, do what the Archbishop told me, and which my brother, without knowing, repeated to me at the airport. That is the heart of the matter: ***Announce the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Do not depart from it.***

### **Conclusion:**

As I prepare to leave Portsmouth, I am filled with gratitude for all that I have learned. I can never thank God and the people of Bamenda and Portsmouth enough. Through the celebration of the sacraments and other liturgies, I have brought some to the faith and helped deepen the faith of others who already believe. My faith too has been tested and strengthened. I hope and pray that more priests and lay people both in Bamenda and Portsmouth get this opportunity, either to go and minister, or to share in the ministry of missionaries like myself.