



Missionary Benedictine Sisters  
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MALATE, MANILA, PHILIPPINES

PEACE AND JOY!

SEPTEMBER 18, 2011

Dear Sisters all over the Priory and Overseas,

I started this on September 8.



Let me greet you all A HAPPY FEAST OF THE NATIVITY, although I am not sure when I can send this letter because we have no access to email in the place where we are now which is a monastery in a mountain of Togo in a village called Dzogbegan.

#### **TRAVEL WOES**

I left the Philippines on August 30 at 3:00 PM one hour later than our schedule. I arrived in Hongkong at 5:00. That is when my nightmare began. The first country in my itinerary was supposed to be Burkina Faso where the 7 members of the CIB Administrative Council including me were supposed to meet before all the other delegates will arrive in Lome. Well I never got there. In the waiting lounge I was approached by the staff of the Ethiopian Airlines that will bring me to my destination asking for my visa to Burkina Faso. I told him that the organizer assured me that I needed only 2 pictures and a visa fee and I will be given one at the Ouadagogo airport. No, he said I must have a paper with me, either a visa or a letter from their ministry. I tried to call up everybody that could help me but no one could be reached. There was a lot of telexing and telephoning. No dice. Verdict: No go. The PAL staff here admitted that the PAL staff in Manila should not have let me board the plane without that visa. So since it is their fault, they gave a voucher for the Lounge. I decided to proceed to Lome since I have a visa there. So I phoned Sr. Ana Maria, Angie and my travel agent, Roselle . So they got me a new ticket Hongkong-Addis Ababa- Lome. In the afternoon of the second day, the PAL staff told me I needed a whole new ticket also the return trip from Lome to Hongkong even if that was not changed. So I had to call back people at home again. All of us did not understand why I had to get a new ticket coming back but anyway I will not be able to board the plane again if I did not have that return trip ticket. So Roselle had to rebook that also. So I spent two nights and three days stranded in Hongkong. Roselle said I should get some paper saying that I was there and that I was not a no-show so she can get a higher refund. So I asked the PAL Staff to give me a copy of their incident report. No, they said, we do not give out such things. It really was an exercise in patience which I lost quite a few times.

So I used my time interviewing the two Pinays who are working in the lounge, Jeannette and Leonor. They shared with me their life stories and they really took care of me, giving me blankets, giving me food for pabaon , etc. And in the waiting lounge, I got to talk with groups of OFW who came and went and I felt as if I was a resident of the Hongkong airport greeting transients. I got to hear many stories from seamen going to France or Barcelona, an accountant and a mechanical engineer going to Equatorial Guinea, OFW's going home to bury a parent, two Pinays who are coming for the first time to Hongkong to work. I gave one a medal and the other one my rosary. There was a Chinese woman who kept on coughing and crying. So I rubbed her back and gave her throat candies. I began to think that there really was a reason why I was stranded in Hongkong.

### **LOME, TOGO**

The next day, September 2, I finally was able to board the Ethiopian Airlines and after 10 hours I landed in Addis-Ababa. There I met a co-delegate to the CIB, Sr. Kym from Australia. She is Prioress of a community of three which constitutes the whole priory! She boarded in Bangkok and she had no visa for Lome but she was not prevented from boarding the plane. It took her 10 minutes to get her visa in the Lome airport. Lesson: Go to Bangkok rather than Hongkong. They are less makulit.

At Lome, Sr. Marie who was our local organizer met us and brought us to the Salesian Sisters where we spent a night. There are two Filipinas there Nori Vito and Estrellita Santiago, one is the sacristan and the other is the Novice Directress. The first thing I read on arrival was : REDECOUVRER L'CIEL. I thought to myself how religious can they be since I translated it as REDISCOVER HEAVEN! Only to realize afterwards that "ciel" also means sky. So it was actually an airline ad which says: Rediscover the sky!

### **DZOGBEGAN, TOGO**

The next day we had a 5 hour drive by bus to this place of Dzogbegan which was like Baguio, which is the venue of our meeting. This is the Assumption Monastery of the Benedictine Sisters who belong to the Subiaco Federation (like San Beda). On the other side of the road further up is the Monastery of the Monks . Their abbot Theodore Coco knows Abbot Tarsi. We had Vespers with them and supper.

We had two days meeting of the CIB where we reviewed the Symposium in Rome last year. There was a typical African opening ritual and opening prayer. There even was an item in the first day program where I was formally congratulated for the 100 Women Citation. The African delegation which consisted of 7 monasteries gave a situationer of West Africa while reviewing the 3 goals approved in Rome for the next 4 years: Solidarity, Authenticity and Reverence. We were then divided into groups (we are about 25) and we shared with one

another how our regions practiced the suggestions regarding the goals. By the way, everything is French here, prayers, signage, etc. I was pleasantly surprised that my one month French Course in Paris a long time ago enables me to understand almost everything and to engage in simple day to day conversation regarding needs like : Where can I get hot water? When will the store be open? Is there ironing possible? Or maybe necessity forces you to understand. We had to approve the financial report and the budget and also the minutes of the previous meeting in Rome. On the second day, we reflected on possible themes of the next symposium in 2014 and gave suggestions for resource persons, facilitators, etc.

I like the nuns' liturgy. Their divine office combines African rhythm with the Gregorian chant. They are accompanied by a Zither and an instrument called Kora which sounds like a harp. I bought a recording to make you listen to their singing. There are 33 Nuns and were founded in 1966. They have many enterprises: yogurt making, bread baking, fruit and vegetable preservation, handicraft, wine making, and vestment making.



Yesterday, the chief of the Village gave us a formal welcome. The whole village gathered at the village square and performed dances with tam tam accompaniment. The chief is dressed like a sultan with a robe that has one bare shoulder a headdress that looked like a crown with golden decoration and golden sandals. He is supposed to be a good Catholic and has only one wife. He speaks very good English.

After the dance performances, they invited us to dance with them. So we enjoyed following their steps but it was impossible for us to follow their hip movements. They really have a complicated way of moving their butts. We had fun taking pictures and having our pictures taken carrying babies and children. The people here although dark have fine features. Some are exotically beautiful.





Today we went to Ghana , the next country to see their waterfall. It was one hour and a half from our village and the border was just like a police barricade although on the Ghana side there were more buildings. Then we walked 4 kilometers to the Falls. It was gorgeous but it was really strenuous because we had to help in bringing our picnic pots to the place and in going back it rained and so was quite slippery. But we went home singing in the car. We have a sort of paparazzi who recorded our every move since the time we arrived—every session, every mass, every office, every event.

On the last day of our meeting, we celebrated the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of CIB (actually on November 6—my birthday pa!). Mother Anastasia solemnly handed a gold Cross pendant to Sr. Judith and we teased her that she looked like a cardinal! That evening we had a farewell program where the Sisters of the community danced, sang and made music for us and gave each one of us a Kanga with a commemorative CIB anniversary motif. I got to learn how to beat their drums because a Sister simply put a sort of a crown on my head and let me take the place of one Sister beating the drum. I got the rhythm right away but I never thought it took quite some energy to beat the drums for sometime. One's whole body is engaged and the arms can become painful afterwards.



I learned very soon the elasticity of African time. They have a saying which goes: You have the clock, we have the time. Our 7:15 breakfast can be as late as 7:45. They said it will take us probably one half hour to reach the waterfall in Ghana because it was only 30 kilometers away and the walk will be about 30 minutes because it was only 2 kilometers from the border to the waterfall. It took us one and a half hours to reach the border of Ghana and an hour to walk to the waterfall because it was not less than 4 kilometers.

On September 10, we were told we would have breakfast at 5:00 A.M. and leave Dzobegan to go on our 500 kilometers drive to Kara in the north of Togo. We of course left at 6:30 and it took us 15 hours drive to Kara in village roads with moon craters. It was only the last

three hours that we rode through a real highway. We had first to pass by the Emmanuel monastery of the monks in Sr. Marie kept on saying three and a half minutes more, which became about 30 minutes after we left the highway. They are St. Ottilien monks and their Prior is Father Bernard. A brother Martin told me that a Digos monk was with him for two years in Cuba. Thanks be to God, Father Bernard speaks German and brother Martin, Spanish. So I could talk to them directly without interpreters. They have an oval chapel which has the shape of an egg and its central part where the altar stands is supposed to be the yolk of the egg. They have a 200 elementary and high school students who live nearby in the village. Beside them is a mosque because the area is mostly occupied by Moslems.

After 3 and a half hours (previously announced as 2 and a half hours), after several voices asked at intervals: are we already there?, we finally, finally reached our final goal – Sadori--Monastere de l' Incarnation, a convent of 7 Sisters founded by the Monastery at Dzobegan. We could almost not believe we had arrived. Sr. Marie said "This is a lesson in infinity!" And how, I said. Not only that , I think I know a little bit more what "dura et aspera" means. After a moment of prayer at their chapel, we had a quick supper and proceeded to our rooms. We had to share rooms and we had to wait for our luggage which had to be brought down from the roof of the bus. We finally went to bed at 11:00 PM!

## **SADORI**

Although there are only 7 Nuns in the community, they are taking care of a very large complex. They also have yoghurt making as one of their livelihood activities. We had a sharing with them in the afternoon. They provide a contemplative presence in this largely Muslim community. I took a walk in their garden and I got a souvenir in my body for it. After breakfast, when I was about to board the bus, I felt an itch on my left leg. When I looked at it, I was so shocked. My whole knee down to half of my leg was full of bites not unlike that when a caterpillar from an acacia tree alights on you, or like the one you get when a jellyfish touches you although it was only itchy and not painful. It looked terrible –almost like leprosy. It was an angry red and the round welts were in rows. Everyone that looked at it was aghast and I got a lot of medicine. Sr. Anne gave me a anti-allergenic crème. And the African sisters bought me anti-allergic pills.

Again we had an experience of the elastic African time. And this time with a reason. Because we had to pass the border going to Benin. It took us almost an hour at the border till every single passport was stamped, etc. And so we arrived again after 15 hours in a beautiful spiritual study and prayer center on top of a mountain called Notre Dame del'Esperance But we were too exhausted to appreciate it especially as our luggage had to be carried from the bottom of the hill, because believe it or not there is no road that reaches the reception area. The Center is made up of round modules with a big statue of some saint on top of it.

The one in charge is Fr. Louie Hondololo who, when he was in Italy studying in the Augustinianum met a Dominican Nun who told him that she saw in a vision a knoll where a spiritual center should be built. When he showed her the place where he was planning to put one up she said that was exactly the place she saw in her dream. Her statue stands on one of the modules. Others were a bishop, St. Patrick, some figures of the old testament. Except for the reception area module, which had a second floor with a dining room and a conference room and a chapel on the third floor, the other 8 units that were arranged like a circle around the hill only had one bedroom each with two beds. So the whole compound could only accommodate 16 guests. The place was cool and at night we had our doors open and we slept with the evening breeze blowing gently to our rooms. After lunch the next day, Fr. Louie gave us a very interesting lecture on Woman from the African Perspective. He said that the African society is largely matriarchal and is a life centered society just as the Oriental society is Way Centered and the West is Truth centered. He said that African says man comes from woman, but woman comes from herself and therefore shares in the great mystery of the Divine. Among the Dahomey people which occupies Benin, the name of God was Maulisa-- Mau (woman) lisa (man). Now they only say Mau or woman. He said that woman is by nature a priest. When the male becomes a priest, he is called a priestess. All consecrated people, whether man or woman is called power/wife of the deity. Unlike in a patriarchal society where the predominance of men necessarily involves an antagonism with and even oppression of women, in the matriarchal society, the predominance of woman does not hold such an antagonism. She is the source of life, of family and of the community. In marriage, the woman does not only marry the man but the whole family. All the brothers of the husband can call her "my wife" and she calls all of them as "my husband", a fact which became a difficulty for a seminarian who was about to be expelled when the Rector read from a letter of his family: "Your wife has just given birth" It turned out that the woman was his sister-in-law. Fr. Louie gave a very interesting re-reading of the Scriptures from the African perspective which is too long to explain here. However I had a difficulty accepting one of his conclusions in explaining male priesthood. He said Mary, as the Mother, delegates to her Son, Jesus the function of her priesthood... Later on I asked him, ok if Mary delegated her priesthood to Jesus, can he not delegate it to men and women afterwards? He said, yes, of course. He concluded that up to now the Church just takes the Western perspective centered on truth. Just imagine, he said, if the Church will now combine the Oriental perspective on the Way and the African perspective on Life, the change in our Church would be tremendous.

After the talk, we had Holy Mass followed by lunch and off we went on to our next destination: the Museum of the Royal Palaces of Abomey. This became a World Heritage Property since 1982. There were twelve kings of the Dahomey people from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the last king Ghebanzin who fought against the French colonizers was deposed by them and sent into exile in Algeria and Mozambique. It all began with the slave trade, when the

European countries started to catch Africans with the connivance of their native rulers and sold to America and Europe under terrible conditions. Even the Dahomey kings participated in this horrible trade. It is estimated that about 6,000,000 slaves were bought and sold until the abolition of slavery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This abolition was not completely altruistic because after the slave trade provided the capital and resources for the industrial revolution, the Europeans no longer needed slaves because of the machines but rather workers and consumers. Anyway we went through the different courtyards of the museum, former palaces of the Kings, each one adding his own courtyard. We were shown the thrones, symbols of power, weapons, articles used by the royal family. A king would have about 4,000 wives. And we were told that when one of the kings died, 200 of his wives offered to die with him but only 40 were accepted and are now in the tomb which has a subterranean passage to the tomb of the king in the other courtyard showing that “love went beyond the grave!” There were gory details like the tomb was plastered with the combined blood of people and animals. In the courtyard with the artillery given by the Portuguese we were told that the King gave the Portuguese 200 slaves and 25 beautiful young women. There was a statue of a man called “prime minister” but actually his job was to cut off the heads of condemned criminals. He must only use one stroke, otherwise he would lose his own head. The last pavilion shown to us was about the French colonization and the deposition and exile of King Gbehanzin. The whole UNESCO project highlights this “struggle aspect”, so that “the true meaning of the tragedy lived by King Gbehanzin, this sovereign of great dignity and exceptional independent spirit can be clearly perceived.” (Junzo Kawada: the Restoration of King Gbehanzin Palace: Benin: Unesco Direction of Cultural heritage, 2007.)

After the visit to the Museum we proceeded to the Convent of St. Joseph in Toffo

This was founded in 1966 by French Nuns of the same congregation as our Vietnamese Sisters Sr. Scholastica and Sr. Elizabeth. Just two years ago, they became independent. They have a beautiful 35 hectare land with a very artistic and symbolically decorated chapel which has main motif—the TREE, which is the symbol of life and monasticism. They have weaving, jam making, embroidery as livelihood. The rooms are very airy and we all slept very well that night. The next day, the bishop came to visit us, gave us the situation of the diocese and his vision as bishop which is to encourage hope especially with the young people. He and some companions said the Mass and ate with us. It happened to be September 14, our Foundation day, so I bought ice-cream for the whole group which was very much appreciated.

On our way home to Togo, we passed by Ouidah, where the slave market used to be and where there is a pilgrimage site. We started at the Chacha (hurry, hurry) place where the slaves taken from all over Abomey were taken. They were put in a sort of prison there. And it is where they were fattened up so that they will look strong when they are exhibited around the

big tree where there is now a statue of a slave. Then we went to a place where they showed what happened to those who are rebellious. They were not only shackled but their mouths are gagged with a kind of wood so they will not encourage others to rebel. Then came the big monument which pictured in a kind of sculptured bas relief the different stages of the journey, from the capture, to their being put on a ship, the way they are arranged like sardines, etc. The women had to lie down on their backs and the men had to make them pregnant so that there will be addition to the slaves they bought. There is also the “tree of forgetfulness”, supposedly a magical tree where the slaves were made to go around three times and they are supposed to forget who they are and what they are. There is also another tree where the men had to go around nine times and the women seven times and this was supposed to tell them that their spirits will return here someday even if they would never return physically. This is again dramatized at the port where there is the Gate of No Return. They know when they will get into the ship they will no longer come back. In this place many committed suicide preferring to die in their homeland. Then we were brought to the Door of Return where there is a statue of Mother Africa welcoming a woman and a man dressed in Western clothes signifying the wish that those who have been brought to other lands especially America and have found good fortune, would someday return to work for the betterment of their homeland. Wishful thinking. But they can dream, can't they?

It was a strenuous trip but the many hours together in the bus gave us a chance to bond more closely. We suffered thirst, bumps, delays, anxieties as well as light moments, jokes, light teasing, care and concern when one was not feeling well. My I-Pad was put to good use because I gave them all a personality test , a life expectancy test and what they enjoyed most was the one where each one had to press her thumb on the tablet , then the tablet will say in what mood the person is—like angry, worried, mixed emotions. We laughed a lot when Sr. Vania got the message “You are in love!”

So that was my West African Safari!

Lovingly,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "A. Mary John Mananzan OSB".

Sr. Mary John Mananzan, OSB

Prioress



Map of Westafrica