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## **My Long Journey to Africa**

Fr. William A. Ryan

The year was 1938. A young Jesuit seminarian with a wrenching decision to make knelt alone in the chapel late at night in front of the tabernacle, the red sanctuary lamp flickering to the side, and prayed for discernment. Should he continue his formation for the priesthood, or was the Lord now calling him to turn in his cassock, leave the Society of Jesus, and embark on another path?

My father was reserved about his interior life and preferred not to speak about that spiritual struggle, but it surely was a difficult one. Just as surely, however, he was guided by the Holy Spirit to the right decision. As he prayed, he could not have known that of the eight children he would one day have, one son, myself, would become a diocesan priest, and another, my brother Peter, would enter the same novitiate he had attended and go on to be a Jesuit priest. But God did know, and held in the palm of his hand during those anguished moments not only my father and his sons, but also the thousands of Togolese who seventy years later are now entrusted to my pastoral care here in the African missions.

How did I come to be here? Only from the perspective of heaven will we fully understand how here on earth God uses persons and circumstances, events and our own free choices to weave the wondrous pattern of our lives. But even now we can recognize certain key influences and connections, and at times we can see how he uses even crosses and evils to lead us along the path he has prepared for us. In this Year for Priests, I offer to him this story of my own vocation with praise and thanks for his gift of the priesthood. I pray that my story might help, in some small way, those who read it to believe more deeply that everything God does is good, even when we cannot understand what he is up to, and to live out their own calling more faithfully.

Until shortly before entering the seminary, I rarely gave thought to the priesthood as a possible vocation. At the end of my senior year in 1972 at Georgetown University, I was unsure what to do with my life. Since Africa had always held a fascination for me, after graduation I decided to join the Peace Corps with the hopes of seeing that great continent and perhaps doing some good while I was there. My application was accepted, and my departure for Togo was set for late January of the following year.

### **Drawn to the Pro-Life Movement**

In the meantime, I had become interested in the emerging pro-life movement. I spent much of those last few months before my departure distributing pro-life literature on several college campuses and doing "sidewalk counseling" with a couple of friends outside abortion clinics in the Washington area, offering help and alternatives to the sad, often frightened women as they arrived. One day when I told my father of our concern that the Church do more to defend unborn

children, he said “Why don’t you talk to Cardinal [Patrick] O’Boyle about it? I know a priest who can get you an appointment.”

So there we were, shortly before my departure date for Togo, sitting in the office of the Archbishop of Washington. As we nervously tried to tell him how we thought the parishes could be more involved in supporting pro-life efforts in the Maryland legislature, the Cardinal listened kindly. When we were finished, he asked us, with his slight Irish brogue, “Gentlemen, have you listened to the radio this morning?” We looked at each other and said we had not. “The Supreme Court has just legalized abortion throughout the land,” he said. It was January 22, 1973, the day *Roe v. Wade* was decided. Pro-lifers came to regard that day as Black Monday, and in more ways than one, it was. When we walked out of the building, I thought I had never seen the sky darker or uglier, as torrents of rain poured down.

I considered canceling my Peace Corps plans in order to continue my pro-life work, but decided I ought to go. In less than a week, I was in Africa, where the seed of my missionary vocation, and in many ways of my priestly vocation itself, would be sown.

Peace Corps applicants cannot select their countries, but they can express a general preference. I had asked to go somewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, but to a place where I could get to Mass on Sunday. I hoped to keep at least that lifeline to God and to the faith while in Africa, but did not expect to experience much more of the Church than that. I was in for a surprise. After our in-country training, I was assigned to a small village whose lay catechist had worked there for many years. We became fast friends, and he was able to take me spiritually “behind the scenes,” so to speak, and to show me the concrete and tangible impact of evangelization in the lives of the villagers. I slowly began to realize that those who seemed most fulfilled and happy, those who seemed to be living the noblest lives in spite of their severe poverty, were the practicing Catholics. Since these people had a cultural background so vastly different from my own, my eyes were opened to the meaning of “Catholic” as universal.

### **Under the Mango Tree**

The Peace Corps has a rule against volunteers evangelizing, and I began to bend if not break that rule. I visited families, and as we chatted in front of their huts, I often encouraged them in their faith. Many evenings after supper I sat under a mango tree in front of my house and prayed the rosary, using beads my father gave me just before I left. When people saw I had put away my rosary, they would stop by to chat. Groups of children would come with their lanterns and sing songs, often Christian hymns they had learned. Years later during one of my visits to the village, one of the women pointed to that tree and said, “That’s where God called you to be a priest, right there under that mango tree!”

I worked in a well-digging program, and traveled to villages on my Yamaha motorcycle to organize well projects and then supervise them. Our equipment was rudimentary, and since we often encountered rock we could not drill through, we had many failures. But we were able to complete a few wells during my two years. That was always a cause of great joy for villages that suffered from severe water problems.

In America we take clean water for granted, and it is hard for us to imagine what it is like to have to walk long distances for dirty water. Still, I began to observe that, important as it was, clean water by itself was not enough to ensure people's happiness or give meaning to their lives. Villagers who now had abundant potable water for the first time soon became used to it, and other problems continued or arose. Jesus himself needed natural water and asked for some from the Samaritan woman, but I began to reflect on what he then went on to tell her: water from a well quenches thirst for a time, but he came to offer us living water that springs up to eternal life (John 4:5-42).

Things began to fit together into a larger picture. God had called me and my friends to try to save the lives of at least some innocent unborn children and to offer help to their mothers. Now he had brought me to Africa to try to help better the lives of at least some Togolese. But he had something far more in mind. He wants every human life to be respected, and he wants all people to live under conditions that are decent and worthy of their human dignity. But he also wants our lives to open up to something infinitely more than what is possible here on earth. He sent his Son to inaugurate a kingdom where, not only all sin and suffering will be eliminated and all human goods will be found in their fullness, but also where we, his adopted children, will share fully in his own divine life.

Was I being called to follow Jesus in helping people to live for that kingdom, and eventually enter into it? Now I did begin to think about the priesthood, but it seemed best to return home before making any decision.

### **A Friend for Life**

Shortly before I left Togo I asked my friend the catechist where I could find a good priest I could speak with—not about a possible vocation to the priesthood, but about a priest who was giving a bad example and the effects it was having on people. The catechist recommended a young Togolese priest named Philippe Kpodzro, who was the headmaster of a boys' high school in Atakpamé, a town about fifteen miles away. I knocked on his door one day with no appointment.

Africans are generally gracious to strangers, and he was particularly so with me. He couldn't do anything directly about the bad situation, but was moved that a young American cared enough about the good of the Church to seek him out, and we hit it off immediately. It was the beginning of a friendship that has lasted thirty-five years. I have thought often about how the Lord used a scandalous situation to set the course of my life. If no bad example had been given, or if I had not been guided to Philippe Kpodzro to talk with him about it, the rest of my life would have been very different.

Reading a newspaper soon after returning to the U. S., I found a story about a Togolese priest being ordained bishop of Atakpamé. The ordination Mass was interrupted by soldiers who entered the cathedral and broke all the windows. The new bishop was Philippe Kpodzro! Years later he told me the full story. It was not a general persecution of the Church, but the president of Togo had been convinced that he should be the one to name the new bishop and had been persuaded to support a different candidate. Furious when his choice was rejected, he sent the soldiers. But the ordination had already taken place, and Bishop Kpodzro escaped safely out a back door of the cathedral. Although he remained in Togo, he was exiled from his diocese for

four years—with a bounty on his head should he try to return—before the government at last allowed him to take up his episcopal ministry.

I entered Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg, Maryland, in 1976, to study for the Archdiocese of Washington, D. C. The four years until ordination to the priesthood passed quickly. While in the seminary, I often thought about Africa. But the conviction that I ought to return there as a missionary did not come until some years later. For one thing, I felt at the time an obligation to the pro-life movement. Some friends and I helped initiate Seminarians for Life, based at Mount St. Mary's. We sent out a newsletter to other seminaries around the country, organized workshops, and encouraged participation in the March for Life held each year in Washington on the anniversary of Roe v. Wade.

Within a few months after my priestly ordination in May of 1980, I was asked by Archbishop James Hickey to serve as pro-life coordinator for the Archdiocese of Washington, in addition to my parish duties. That was not easy for a lot of reasons, but with God's grace and the help of some great people, we started several crisis pregnancy centers and undertook some educational and advocacy activities.

Africa remained in my heart, though, and by 1985, the longing to return to Togo became profound. I had visited my Peace Corps village in 1981, and had stayed in touch over the years with Bishop Kpodzro. We had talked about the possibility of my returning one day. When I told him how my desire had deepened, he invited me to seek permission for temporary service in his diocese, where there was a grave shortage of priests. After much prayer I put my request to Archbishop Hickey.

### **A Different Kind of Mission**

He had other ideas. Understandably concerned about the rapid influx of Spanish-speaking immigrants to the Washington area, he decided to send me and another priest to Latin America for a year of language and cultural studies as preparation to serve Hispanics. This was a deep disappointment to me, but not at all because of the new assignment itself, which I at once realized could be both pastorally fruitful and enriching for me personally. Rather, it was because I knew that my longing to go to Togo was for priestly service that the Church encouraged in the strongest possible language in its statements on the missions. I also foresaw that my desire was not likely to go away. I knew I couldn't make it go away, and now I wasn't sure what I should "do" with it. I had a lot to learn about patience.

All I could think to do was to ask our Lord for the grace to throw myself as completely into Hispanic ministry as if I had no desire to return to Africa. I suspect he smiled at that prayer. He certainly answered it, and then some. Hispanics are a wonderful people, and they gave me much more than I gave them. After the year in Latin America, mostly in the Dominican Republic and Colombia but with visits to many other countries, I was blessed with a spiritually rewarding ministry with Hispanics for sixteen unforgettable years, from 1986–2002.

The last nine of those years at St. Martin's Church in Gaithersburg, Maryland, were particularly fruitful. Three Sunday Masses in Spanish were added during my time there, and participation in the religious education program for Hispanic children increased from one hundred to nine

hundred. In God's wise plan, St. Martin's would eventually be a "sister" parish to my parish here in Togo, and would provide invaluable support for the mission.

There was enough to do in Hispanic ministry for more than a lifetime. Yet during all those years, the attraction to the African missions never left me. I had a deep sense that some very different chapters were yet to be written in my vocation story. My spiritual director encouraged me to keep seeking God's will and helped me to think things through.

### **In God's Time, Not Mine**

The door finally opened in 2001 when I renewed my request to the new Archbishop of Washington, Theodore McCarrick. In his breezy way, he said sure, I could go to the African missions, but I would need to wait a year so that he could find someone for St. Martin's. It seemed that my long wait was almost over.

Little did I know that it would be not one but five more years—years which, as I look back on them, are now a blur. A freak knee injury led to a series of five failed operations—each of which, I was assured beforehand, had a high likelihood of success. A sixth surgery was successful enough to allow me to walk with a cane. If I don't overdo it, I can carry out a reasonably normal, though somewhat physically limited, ministry.

Every time an operation didn't work, I would call Togo to give then-Archbishop Kpodzro (in 1992 he had been named Archbishop of Lomé, the capital) the news that there would be yet another delay in my arrival. Each time I expected him to say, well, maybe your coming isn't God's will. But he always said the opposite: that he really thought I would come in God's good time, and that I should be patient. We agreed that we had both learned to be "experts in the art of waiting"—he while in exile from his first diocese and I during my long delay in beginning missionary service. "*Per crucem ad lucem,*" he would say to me: "Through the cross to the light."

I finally arrived here in Togo in 2006, the first American-born missionary ever to serve in this small French-speaking country. The only requests I made of Archbishop Kpodzro were that the new mission parish where I was to be the founding pastor would be in a rural area rather than the capital, and that it would be named Our Lady of Guadalupe.

That's because I wanted to bring the best of America with me—and without a doubt, Our Lady of Guadalupe is that. After all, she was given the title "Empress of the Americas" by Pope Pius XII and "Mother of the Americas" by Pope John XXIII. I wanted the graces Mary would obtain for her new mission parish here to be doubled, and half of them sent back home to be poured out upon the Hispanics and all the others I had served, especially at St. Martin's.

Since Our Lady of Guadalupe is also recognized more and more as the patroness of the pro-life movement, I wanted to remain spiritually joined through her to that great cause as well. And since it was Mary who obtained the greatest miracle of evangelization in the history of the Catholic Church, with nine million baptisms in the ten years following her apparition at Guadalupe in 1531, I wanted her to be at the heart of the work of the mission, as we seek to bring the good news of her son Jesus to three dozen villages.

Already the mission has been abundantly blessed. Certainly in terms of construction, in a poor area where the Church had essentially no infrastructure, progress has been remarkable: there now are a rectory, a convent where three Togolese sisters have taken up residence, a medical clinic, schools and chapels in several villages, and of course, wells.

But the Church is being built up first and foremost in the hearts of the people. That task here in Togo is so enormous that St. Paul's question about missionary work—"Who is qualified for this?" (2 Corinthians 2.16)—readily answers itself. We priests know that, like Paul, we work from weakness, not from strength, and that the only way forward is to deepen our trust in Christ, to whom we were configured on the day of our ordination and into whose likeness we must grow more and more each day.

It has been rightly said that a missionary should work himself out of his job. As priestly ordinations for the Archdiocese of Lomé slowly increase, I know that an important part of my work is to prepare the way as well as I can for a Togolese priest to eventually take my place as pastor of this parish. How many years from now that will be, I can't say. I have learned that the future truly is in God's hands. For now, I can only praise him for bringing me here, and echo Mary's exultant cry: "The Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name!" (Luke 1.49).

*For information on the progress of the mission parish of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Togo, including email photo reports from Fr. Ryan, go to [www.togomissionparish.org](http://www.togomissionparish.org).*