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40 DAYS**IN TOGO****(A Missionary Summer – 1990)**

It is not easy to say a few words about an exceptionally vivid experience which lasted for 40 days. Well they know who have experienced it previously, as this gratifying venture is really not that uncommon.

For the summer of 1990, the project offered to the District of Catalonia was located in TAMI, north of Togo. Some useful information for future participants would indicate that TOGO is a Republic of Western Africa, situated between BURKINA FASO (formerly Upper Volta), GHANA (formerly THE GOLD COAST), and BENIN. Geographically it is a corridor 700 km long funnelling down to a 52 km wide strip of Atlantic seacoast. Its entire width varies from 45 to 140 km. Its surface covers 57.000 km². Its tropical climate varies from North to South. In the North we find the sahelian plain which is the poorest and most undeveloped area. During the dry season from October to April the scarcity of water is very acute because of the lack of springs, water-holes and dams which could hold the abundant waterfall of the rainy season from May till September.

Our Rural Formation Center is in the northern region, about 35 km from the border with BURKINA FASO. It belong to the diocese of DAPAONG and since its foundation in 1973 it has been run by the Brothers of our Institute.

This Rural Formation Center is designed to accommodate 24 families, in very simple houses. Besides these, there is a residence for the native supervisor and his family, plus the residence of the Brothers. There are classroom buildings and other provisions for the storage of products and machinery. About 120 acres of land are under cultivation and at the end of the growing season (which coincides with the rainy season) all that is produced reverts to the "students" known as "stagers". This includes cotton, peanuts, corn, rice, millet and soy beans. Because of an absolute lack of

water during the dry season, all cultivation is at a standstill and the "students" return to their villages. The Brothers work at digging wells wherever that is possible, with the help of the local people.

PROJECT «TAMI 1990»

The possibility of doing something in the missions during the summer is coordinated through the District, which pays for the round trip air fare. In my case, the very efficient arrangements were made by Brother Auxiliary Visitor Juan Lluís Casanovas in conjunction with PROYDE. It is the responsibility of those in charge of the Missions in the Central District to propose projects with the advice and consent of the Council of the missionary Subdistrict.

Project «Tami – 1990» consisted in the "reforestation of a sector in the Rural Center", working and living with the Community of Brothers and with the local people, particularly the 24 families who are called "stagers" at the center.

The objective was easily attained by the target date. However the most important part of this experience for me was not so much my contribution to the labor involved, which I greatly enjoyed, but especially the personal impact of my direct contact with the difficult realities with which these people must live daily. From a distance it is impossible even to imagine... with hindsight, I can honestly say that I did not go "to give" but rather "to receive".

"The missionary experience" this summer provided two basic experiences:

The first was an experience of community in the most authentic sense of the "Lasallian Family" as we conceive of it today. In fact, the members of this group (4 Brothers and 4 laymen from La Salle in Catalunya, plus a young couple – he a teacher and she a doctor – surgeon and student of medicine) joined the Community of Brothers of Tami and shared the work and the pangs of adaptation common to missionaries everywhere. We shared daily prayer, Mass, meals, meditation and relaxation... as members of a family. Elbow to elbow, we were witnesses of the total commitment of the true missionary, the surrender of self to the reality of Africa, the simple and generous effort to live the African way, the close and easy social contacts between the various missionary communities, both male and female, and the belonging to the Church of Togo – the whole diocese of Dapaong. We worshipped with the people on Sundays, in their many villages, the African way, to the rhythm of tom-tom and dance.

Every two or three days we had a meeting to review our group living and to share our personal impressions.

This experience alone would be sufficient to consider 40 days in the missions as time well spent.

Still, an even greater benefit came to me. I had the opportunity of living close to the people of this place; i.e., to the 24 families whose homes as "stagers" were all around the Brothers' residence. The three doctors in our group had an intimate experience of the life and death of these persons as well as of the sanitation problems endemic to their situation.

As a final summary of all these thought-provoking and unforgettable experiences I can testify to:

- The extreme simplicity and poverty of this people and their way of life.
- Their capacity for suffering.
- Their humble and open approach to all of us.

Even admitting that our own values sometimes do not make much sense, we were deeply shocked to see the degradation to which the women are sometimes subjected. Unfortunately they are treated as mere slaves, as simple instruments for work and reproduction, entirely subject to the whim of the men who can buy them, sell them and even mutilate them at will...

What is the role of the Center in this context? Right off we could say that it addresses the work of elevating the human person by realistic and practical means which are bearing fruit very gradually – African style.

This Center at Tami, placed in an essentially agricultural region is arousing the awareness of the farmers to new possibilities and providing them with the means to improve. Concomitantly, the intellectual foundation is being provided through classes in which literacy is being stimulated and a higher view of humanity, both men and women, is being acquired, which will directly influence the position of women.

All this is fundamental when coupled with the witness of a Religious community whose commitment adds the dimension of the values of God's Kingdom. Here too everything is at "the rhythm of the African way".

The diocese of Dapaong is only 3% Catholic. Preaching the Gospel is not something easily done in a region which is dominated by an ancestral religion of animism and fetiches with the added complication of an aggressive moslem infiltration.

Accordingly there is only a small number of Christian "stagers" at the Center. However, everyone respects the small Christian group with its own native

catechist. These people meet weekly to devoutly offer the Sacrifice of the Mass in their own language and style with the presence of the Brothers, whose prestige among them as good and devoted men, is very apparent.

The matter of language does not make the work any easier. In Togo, with a population of 2 1/2 million, there are about 50 dialects. In the North "moba" predominates. Yet, the cultural language is French which is taught in every school.

The school holds a very important place because it is considered as the essential factor in determining the future of the country, and it is also the main instrument of evangelization. Togo is a young country because 60% of the population is under 20 years of age. The Christian Brothers have an active role in the academic development of the country, especially in Togoville and Dapaong. For some time, now, a Brother is the Director of Catholic Schools in the diocese of Dapaong, as well as the coordinator and supervisor of a considerable number of teachers of rural schools. Presently, this is Brother Enrique Cepero. His predecessors were Brothers whom we knew and respected very highly: Brother Jaume Godoy at the beginning, and later, Brother Fernando Izaguirre who died recently in Zaire.

I will close with a very sincere observation which, I am sure, is shared by all those who worked at "missionary Summer – 1990": It is very worth our while to help these good people in any way that we possibly can. They need it desperately and receive it most appreciatively.

AN AGREEABLE SURPRISE

We did not expect to find an English-speaking group in TOGO who, like ourselves, had come to contribute a summer of work. They were in the same diocese of Dapaong in the mission of Boma. We had several get-togethers with them. The group was comprised of 3 Brothers of whom 2 were from Great Britain (Bros. John Deeney and Anthony Rothwell) and 1 from Malta (Bro. Mario Zammit). They were accompanied by a lay teacher and 8 Seniors from our schools in Great Britain (4 boys and 4 girls). They worked for 5 weeks at the construction of a meeting room, 2 small sleeping rooms and a kitchen for the Parish of this mission.

Bro. Angel Cirera