

□ Reading time: 5 min.

In 1995, 28 years ago, I left my beloved Argentina for missionary Africa with the same ideal as Zeffirino Namuncurà: to become a Salesian and a priest “useful to my people” in my beloved Africa.

And here I am, sitting under a noble, 100-year-old African tree, with a temperature of 36 degrees and 70% humidity, reflecting on my missionary life. From here I contemplate the beautiful rainforest painted in a thousand shades of infinite green, overflowing with life, full of mysteries and a thousand questions waiting to be answered. A true multicoloured mural like my missionary life: drawn in a thousand colours, painted in different shades and tones, blessed by challenges and rewards, by projects and dreams, by brushstrokes of light to shade the darker and more difficult tones of the mission.

First steps

My first steps in Africa were steps of discovery and reverence. I said to myself, “Africa is rich!” and, like a teenager, I fell in love with it at first sight.... I fell in love with the diversity of its landscapes and exuberant geography, its fauna and flora, its seas and jungles, its immense savannahs and deserts. It is rich in natural resources: gold, diamonds, oil, uranium, timber, agriculture and fisheries. I realised immediately that Africa is not poor, but it is very badly managed. I fell in love with its cultures, languages, colours, smells and tastes. I was captivated by their rhythms, their music, the vibration of their eardrums, the sound of their musical instruments, their songs and dances full of life. And above all, I fell in love with its people and its young people, because this is certainly its greatest wealth: its children, its young people who represent the present and the future of the continent of hope.

Missionary temptation

When you are young, inexperienced, and you arrive in mission land with a thousand expectations and a heart full of dreams, the first temptation is to think that you are coming to “save”, that you are an “envoy”, called to “change the world”, to “transform”, to “teach”, to “evangelise”, to “heal”. It is there that your promised land teaches you the value of humility. And your people teach you that, to be a missionary, you must make yourself as small as a child, you must be born again: you must learn to speak new languages, to understand new and different customs, to change lifestyles, ways of thinking and feeling. In the mission you learn to keep quiet, to receive corrections, to accept humiliation and to suffer culture shocks. The

true missionary unlearns in order to learn anew, until arriving at the most beautiful discovery: it is your people who “educate” you, “evangelise” you, “transform” you, “heal” you. They become your “Kairos”, your “time of God”, they are the “theological place” where God manifests himself to you and finally “saves” you.

African lessons

From the southern hemisphere, Africa has much to teach the Christian and “developed” West and the North. Here are some lessons I learnt in Africa.

The first lesson is “Ubuntu”: “I am, because we are”.

Africans love family, community, working and celebrating together. They are deeply generous and caring, always ready to lend a hand to anyone in need. They know that the individualist dies in isolation. African wisdom confirms this: “If you walk alone, you go faster, but if you walk in a group, you go further.” “It takes three stones to keep the pot on the fire.” “The tree that is alone withers; the tree that is in the forest lives.”. “It takes a whole village to raise a child.” And in the same vein: “It takes a whole village to kill a rabid dog.” “If two elephants fight, it is the grass that loses.” Fraternal life and community keep the family, clan and tribe alive.

The second is respect for life and elders

A son or daughter is always a blessing from heaven, a joy for the whole family, and hands to work the land and harvest. Life is a gift from God. That is why it is said “where there is life, there is hope” and “protecting the seed protects the harvest.” And because life expectancy is low, the elderly are valued, loved and “cared for”. There are no nursing homes or old people’s homes here. Grandparents are the heritage of the village. Children sit around the elders to listen to ancestral stories and the wisdom of the ancestors. That is why we say here that “when an elder dies, it is like burning down a library” and “if you forget your elders, you forget your shadow.”

The third is about suffering and resilience

African wisdom says that “pain is a silent host” and states that “through suffering one acquires wisdom.” That is why it is said that “patience is the medicine for all pain.” They turn obstacles into opportunities. They are not afraid of sacrifice or death. For them, losing a crop, a material good, a loved one, is an opportunity to start again, to create something new. They know that nothing is achieved without effort and sacrifice; that the only way to succeed is to enter through the narrow door and they bless God who gives and takes away at the same time.

A fourth lesson concerns spirituality and prayer

Africans are 'spiritual' by nature. They are willing to give their lives for what they believe in. God is omnipresent in their lives, in their history, in their speeches, in their celebrations. Every activity begins with a prayer and ends with a prayer. That is why their proverbs say: "When you pray, move your feet" "don't look to God only when you are in trouble" and "where there is prayer, there is hope." If one does not pray, life becomes bland and sterile. They pray as if "everything depends on God, knowing that in the end everything depends on them", as a great African saint would say.

In my missionary life, I am mission

In three decades, we have built schools and vocational training centres, built churches and shrines, chapels and community centres, done emergency interventions during the civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia, opened homes for child soldiers, helped Ebola orphans, provided care for street children or girls in prostitution. But these activities are not identified with mission. The fruits of missionary activity are measured in terms of life transformation. And in this sense I confess that I have seen miracles: I have seen child soldiers rebuild their lives, I have seen street children become lawyers at university, I have seen them smile again and go back to school, I have seen girls in prostitution return to their families, learn a trade and start again.

As Pope Francis says, "we don't have a mission, or do mission" We are mission. I am the mission. My mission is to be the "sacrament of God's love" for the most vulnerable. That is, that they, through my hands, my eyes, my ears, my legs, my heart, can experience that God loves them madly, that he gives them life, through my life given to them. This is what being a Salesian missionary means to me. That is why I am mission when I kneel before the Eucharist asking for their salvation; I am mission when I am in the courtyard or at home accompanying the children, I am mission when I travel to the most distant and dangerous areas, I am mission when I celebrate the Eucharist, hear confessions or baptise. I am on mission when I sit down to read or study thinking about them. I am on mission when I put together a strategic plan with my brothers and sisters or write a project to improve the quality of life of my people. I am on mission when I build a school or a chapel. I am on mission when I share my life with you who are reading this.

We are all missionaries by vocation

Dear friends, through baptism we are all called to be missionaries, to be mission.

We do not have to go to Africa to be missionaries. The missionary call is an inner call to leave everything, to give everything where God has planted us. Not to give things, but to “give myself”, to “share” my time, my talents, my faith, my professionalism, my love, my service with the most vulnerable. If you hear this call, do not put it off. The charity of Christ and the urgency of the Kingdom are calling you.

Fr Jorge Mario CRISAFULLI, sdb, Provincial Africa Niger Niger