

MY CONNECTION NO 12

December 4, 2024

Dear friends,

Since I'm getting old and old people talk about old things, I'd hate to disappoint you. So, I'll talk about my 60 years of missionary life. However, I won't do as the Italian Nuncio did when he naively said: "When I look at my backside". Let's forgive him for ignoring the nuances of French or English! For my part, when I look "back" on my missionary life, here are the four parts I see.

First, I'm a Ti-Québécois.

Born in Saint-Maurice into the beautiful family of Monique and Achille: nine girls and three boys. As the second youngest, I was Ti-Gars and my dog was Ti-Loup. After three years at the local school, I reluctantly left my "school female teacher" and became a boarder at the Jardin de l'Enfance, then at the Séminaire de Trois-Rivières. It was a heartbreaking departure that no



Ti-Gars with Ti-Loup

doubt paved the way for many others. In fact, when we "took our ribbons" - that is, when we announced our career choices at the end of the classical course at the time - I chose Missions-Étrangères. Just imagine! In the mentality of scouts and grown up Ti-Gars, it was a commitment to "the highest service". Five years of training led to my ordination to the priesthood. That was sixty years ago, on December 19, 1964, in the middle of a snowstorm in my home village.

I became Cuban.

Yes, but not immediately. I needed four months of language study and cross-cultural training in Mexico to clear the snow from my feet. I was no longer interested in converting souls; rather I had to search for God in other

environments. It wasn't going to be in Japan (which I'd first heard about) but in Cuba, a marxist and atheist milieu where the church was learning, painfully, to live in humility. What I sought there, what I found, was the friendship of the people. I became a friend in the animation of parishes and in the training of future priests. Many of my friends (parishioners and parish priests alike) have chosen to live in exile in Miami, but many are also leaders of the Christian communities that are much alive and well in this pearl of the Caribbean. As for me, when I left Cuba because my confreres asked me to become assistant to the Superior General, I lamented like a calf. What a heartbreak!



The Cuban blue sea and the blue sky on the wall of my apartment, with the dancing buildings of Havana.

Six years later, I become migrant and Sudanese.

Let's be clear, becoming Sudanese is not the same as becoming Cuban. It takes longer to learn the language; Arabic has a lot more secrets and sand in its throat than Spanish. Above all, this is no longer America, but Africa. What's more, in Sudan, we're on the border between the black world and the Arab world. As a missionary, are we going to side with the divide or with dialogue? After a few years, you manage to stammer Arabic, but it takes takes more time to learn about culture and Islam. Especially when radical Islam dominates, as was the case in Sudan. That brand, today, we call it Islamism. In this mess, the Ti-Quebecer discovered Khartoum, learned to make himself useful and led Christian communities living in a rather



hostile environment. At the time, there were many such communities among the million people displaced by famine and war in southern Sudan. In such an environment, the church was not only catechumenate for those eager to follow Jesus; it was also school and clinic. In any case, there was no twiddling of thumbs,

either in the parish, the seminary or the archdiocese. It was against this backdrop that I was once again called to be Vicar General of my Missionary Society. No tears this time. The bonds had not become as warm as they had been in Cuba, but, yes, it was a very painful to leave an immense task barely begun.

Skipping eleven years (which I'll come back to in a moment), **here I am, a Kenyan.**

Yes, in 2009, I end up in Kenya, which we had chosen to support our mission in Sudan. Both politically and ecclesiastically, it's the hub of East Africa. It has all the services we need to train our young missionaries. So I got involved in accompanying the young generation on training. I did it with pleasure and conviction and, at the same time, I discovered other avenues. In Cuba, liturgy and theology had been an important part of my ministry. In Sudan, the inter-religious dimension colored my commitments. In Kenya, I was to learn and experience that a missionary is also a promoter of justice (JPIC: Justice and Peace and Integrity of Creation). I got involved in this myself and promoted social involvement in the areas where I worked. I



With a Masai friend in festive dress

would set up a homily service where we learned how to read the Word of God with the newspaper in hand and with the support of popular wisdom. I also tried to help the Christian communities take charge of its finances, as far away as possible from foreign dollars and, above all, from political influences. Believe me, we haven't succeeded completely.

In 2018, semi-retired but still a missionary, I'm back with the leadership of my Missionary Society.

I was not new to this service. In fact, I had served in this capacity in the early 80s, and again at the turn of the 2000s. It was a service that came naturally to me. Clever people used to say that I was superior for life, but don't believe them. That's not true! In fact, I just happened to be there when we decided to open new missions: China and Sudan, then Kenya. Even there when we had to promote the internationality of our members and associates and there also when the life of the Society demanded more

fund-raising. There when our shrinking personnel led us to project closures. There also to encourage our younger generation to build projects for today's mission. There again when it was time to plan our future and that of our central house, which has become too big for us. I feel like I'm pulling my own leg or sounding like a grandfather! Is this what it's like to be old?

“Which mission did you love the most?” you may ask. I've loved them all, but differently:

In Cuba, I experienced the mission as a friendship.

In Sudan, it was mission in truth and inter-religious patience.

In Kenya, I experienced mission as justice and peace.

And I'm not done yet, I still hold back my tears when I think about Cuba. From afar, I accompany the 10 million people displaced by the war in Sudan. Here, in Québec, I try being a prophet of justice and ecology, as I've learned in Kenya. And I feel volunteer returning to Khartoum or becoming a Palestinian! Yes, I'm keeping mission as a life companion... for another sixty years!

Merry Christmas in your own mission, whatever it be!

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