



# MISSIONARIES IN ACTION

## DOMINICAN MISSION FOUNDATION

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## *Bearing Crosses and Hope*



Dear Mission Friends:

Last month's newsletter focused on the lifelong service of Sr. Teresa Martin, O.P. and her calling to be a missionary, particularly to the needy in Ayene, Equatorial Guinea in western Africa. This month features a broader report from her fellow missionary sisters in Ayene describing their evolving response to the Covid pandemic in the villages they serve.



Certainly no one in the world, including each of you, our Mission Friends, has been untouched by the Covid crisis, but in Equatorial Guinea, it is just one more addition to their ongoing list of life-threatening adversities.

**The irony is, however, that the sisters offer us more of a sense of hope than despair, a hope that they seek to spread to the beloved people to whom they minister, but also one that the people impart to the good sisters to sustain them in their calling.**

*Above, preschoolers re-enacting the Stations of the Cross; right, the sisters who minister in Ayene, flanking the local priest.*



During this traditional season of hope for all Christians in which we commemorate Christ's persecution, crucifixion, and resurrection in glory, let us follow the sisters' example in detecting and spreading hope in the face of the crosses we all bear.

In Christ's peace,  
Fr. Martin de Porres Walsh, O.P.

## The Pandemic, Prayer, and Perseverance

At the beginning of 2020, the members of our small community of Dominican sisters here in Ayene were energized with the progress we were making, our momentum growing daily. Our schedule was allowing us to accomplish our countless routine tasks and tackle larger, previously-thought-impossible projects. Then when everything came to a sudden standstill, we felt paralyzed and stunned, quickly realizing that most of our many tasks and projects would have to be abandoned. We were initially hopeful, however, that we might be able to continue some of the most necessary ones within the new rules and protocols, but that was not to be the case. Strict confinement due to Covid 19 was mandated for us as well as for all those we serve.

Every day we saw and heard on television statistics on the fast and rampant spread of the virus around the world, the thousands of lives lost, and the number of people who sacrificed their lives to care for the countless sick people. Here in Africa, specifically in Equatorial Guinea, we learned that the numbers of affected were growing out of control and that the only thing that could be done was to isolate them in the hope that they would improve, because the country did not have adequate supplies or facilities to deal with what was required.

Every border was closed and even the boundaries between cities and towns within the country were blocked.



*Left, below, and bottom of next page, one of the sisters leading students, staff, and villagers in a prayer session.*

The people in the destitute villages could no longer go down to the city to sell the products they grew and the animals they hunted in the jungle, bringing to a halt their meager income by which they paid for any needed services or stocked up on what is not provided by nature.

Fear dominated the minds of many. For us, prayer was our only support. We offered up to God our availability to be his instruments here, asking him to guide us in discerning how to confront and alleviate this dire situation. It became increasingly difficult to be shut up and alone without doing something to help

and support our beloved people. **And from prayer, we made the decision to give what we could from our charism. After a few months, we opened our doors and went out to the nearby towns to share with the people a message of hope that would strengthen their faith in our good God.**

We offered moments of prayer and reflection in the face of the confinement situation, we organized Eucharistic celebrations and prayed the rosary, we restarted catechesis classes, and we resumed visits to the sick in their homes. All continue to express feeling supported by our presence in their villages.



*Right, a sister lending support as women endeavor to wash clothes in the muddy river.*



But God's generosity is boundless, and when we went out to meet our brothers and sisters, we found that they in turn had a message from God for us! We came home from our outings bearing bananas and beans and memories of open arms and smiles and grateful tears. We felt supported materially, morally, and spiritually. We discovered a common strength and resilience among all we visited. Certainly now it is more difficult—often impossible—to obtain what they need, but they know how to survive with the bare necessities that nature allows them at any given time. They do not permit themselves to be overwhelmed by a crisis, but rather they actively seek ways to continue their lives. Perhaps the difficulties that they have faced all their lives in obtaining the sustenance necessary for survival have prepared them for this situation.

Indeed, Covid 19 is just one more misfortune to befall this country. Perhaps even more people continue to get sick and die and from the country's long-time diseases, including malaria, typhoid, malnutrition, and AIDS. These diseases do not take vacations and they continue to appear and spread, but the authorities are so concentrated on Covid that these diseases are being put on the back burner.



In fact, in recent months we have seen some children die from malnutrition and some elderly die from malaria because visiting health workers and their resources, medicines and tests, have been almost totally focused on Covid. We often receive knocks on our door late at night from parents with sick children, pleading for us to treat them or take them to the nearest hospital, and we do what we can as fast as we can. But we feel frustrated and helpless to know that some of those who died could have been saved had their diseases been detected earlier or treated sooner, albeit assuming they had the means to travel to the nearest health center and the money to pay for the needed medicines or transfusions. Here we must mention in thanksgiving an angel on earth, Dr. Amauri Casares, a Cuban physician who attends to the poor who get to him in time without charging a penny.

We are also grateful, especially in light of the news we hear about schools still being closed in many parts of the world, that we were able to safely reopen our school in September for the 2020-2021 academic year.

*Page 4 captions: Sisters training faculty, leading seminars, and celebrating the Eucharist in a village chapel.*



We started with training the teachers in the newly required safety and hygiene protocols, and then when the children arrived, we organized the procedure of deworming the students from preschool to 6th grade and we distributed preventative medicine to the teachers and staff. This has always been our custom at the beginning of each trimester because at home the students are not well nourished nor do they have adequate hygiene measures and so they arrive filled with parasites, causing them to feel weakened in every way, physically, emotionally, and academically. Then we began our curriculum as usual, seeking to provide a quality education in academics and Christian values, including regular recitation of the missionary rosary.

Unfortunately, we have had to tighten our already tight budget as well as reduce the aid of school scholarships. Due to Covid confinement, resulting in companies laying off workers or closing, or preventing many from selling the products of their harvest or game animals, parents have not been able to pay the school fees.

And we are well aware that these difficulties are not only happening here but all over the world since we are not receiving the usual help that comes to us from some donors in America. **But we opened the school year with a celebration of the Eucharist, thanking God for allowing us to open as we did and putting this new school year in his hands. We are determined to find a way to continue.**

In the midst of this situation that the whole world has had to experience, we continue to unite in prayer for the many needs of

our people here and to contribute, albeit a grain of sand, to their wellbeing. As time moves on, we are appreciating more and more the opportunity to learn to walk the mission within this new normal. Here we are and here we will stay, accompanying all our brothers and sisters in prayer and offering them what support we can in this small place within the giant world.

Praise to the Lord,  
*Dominican Sisters of Our Lady of Guadalupe and St. Vincent Ferrer,*  
Ayene, Equatorial Guinea

